

# *Drink Alone and Die*

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

No one except a homicidal maniac, surely, would commit murder by putting cyanide into a bottle of gin from which three people were accustomed to pour their evening drinks? But it so happened that on a particular night two of the three women in Miss Harriet Marks' flat had a good reason for not wanting to drink gin. So the third woman drank alone—and died.

The question which most troubled Inspector Cheviot Burmann was whether the fact that the other two women had not drunk the gin was a lucky chance or the result of a situation contrived by the poisoner.

This is quite one of the author's most intriguing detective stories, with a solution that will elude, we hope, even Belton Cobb's most devoted and experienced followers.

*By the same author*

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NO ALIBI  
THE POISONER'S MISTAKE  
QUICKLY DEAD  
FATAL DOSE  
LIKE A GUILTY THING  
INSPECTOR BURMANN'S BUSIEST DAY  
HOME GUARD MYSTERY  
DOUBLE DETECTION  
DEATH IN THE 18th DOSE  
EARLY MORNING POISON  
THE SECRET OF SUPERINTENDENT MANNING  
THE FRAMING OF CAROL WOAN  
NO LAST WORDS  
STOLEN STRYCHNINE  
NO CHARGE FOR THE POISON  
THE LUNATIC, THE LOVER  
NO MERCY FOR MARGARET  
NEXT-DOOR TO DEATH  
DETECTIVE IN DISTRESS  
CORPS'L INCOGNITO  
NEED A BODY TELL?  
THE WILLING WITNESS  
ETC.

BELTON COBB

*Drink Alone and Die*

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A CHEVIOT BURMANN MYSTERY



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## CHAPTER ONE

### I WITNESS A TRAGEDY

I

THE first ten<sup>o</sup> days of my engagement to Cheviot Burmann were wonderful. Then he had a telephone call, packed his bag in great haste, and departed to South Wales in pursuit of a gang of jewel thieves, leaving me alone to deal with my bottom drawer and other preparations for our wedding.

I then decided that being engaged to be married was lovely but that being engaged to a detective—particularly the kind of detective who could be sent to South Wales at just the wrong time—was a mistake: in which case, marrying a detective would be an even worse mistake, because he would always be rushing away just when I particularly wanted him. But as I couldn't help marrying Cheviot—"Never marry a man," said the old lady, "unless you can't help it"—I could only make the best of things and live for the moments when my husband wasn't a detective in the active sense. If there were any.

I wished I had been going to marry a nice staid Civil Servant, with an attaché case and fixed hours of work. And then I wondered what would happen if they wanted to send Cheviot to South Wales or somewhere, when he was waiting at the chancel steps and I was coming up the aisle.

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Not liking that thought, I concentrated on the problem of where I was to live till the wedding bells had rung and I could be installed in Cheviot's flat. For years I had lived in a fur. bed-sitt., and now, for reasons which had a great deal to do with my being the affianced bride of Detective-Inspector Cheviot Burmann<sup>1</sup>—I was suddenly homeless. Cheviot had put me into an hotel near his flat: but its prices were high and there was no point in my remaining there when he was hundreds of miles away. If there had been time, I would have discussed that with him before he left. But when the call of duty came he was a changed man. He just stopped to give me a kiss—intended, I trust, for my lips but landing, because of haste, on my nose—he said, "Bye, dearest. Don't get into trouble," and then he ran after his jewel thieves.

I don't know what sort or degree of trouble he wanted me not to get into. He could hardly have thought of the kind of serious trouble in which I did get involved almost as soon as he left me.

#### II

The accommodation question was solved with the assistance of my cousin, who did urgent telephoning on my behalf and eventually rang up to say that her friend, Harriet Marks, would be delighted to put me up for a few days, while I looked around.

Without explaining why, my cousin referred to Miss Marks as "they," as if there were several of her. "They"

<sup>1</sup> See "The Willing Witness".

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were quite charming, she said, and extraordinarily kind, and I should be made very welcome. Nothing would be too much trouble for "them." Moreover, "they" were terribly excited, she said, over the idea of having a bride in the house.

It didn't sound what I wanted, because I am quite dreadfully independent: I detest being fussed over and have the darkest suspicions when people show signs of being "kind" to me. But nevertheless I decided to give it a trial.

I packed my belongings and went to Miss Marks's house. There, a rather sweet-faced little woman of about fifty-five opened the door to me and said, "Oh, is it Miss Benson? Do come in. Everything is ready for you and there is a bottle in, to air the bed. I do hope you'll be comfortable with us. And happy. But then you can't help being happy, now, can you? You must tell us all about the lucky man, we are simply longing to hear."

If I had been a normally nice-minded person, I'm sure I should have melted into tears at that welcome. But, being me, I went cold and stiff and said it was nice of her to put me up, in a tone that was only just polite.

She said, "It is so wonderful to have someone young and pretty. And in love, too. Like a rosebud just opening out. I'm longing to meet him and congratulate him."

I thought it very unlikely that she'd have the chance. One day of that sort of gush would be more than I could

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stand: and there was no chance of Cheviot being back as soon as that.

We crossed the hall to the strains of Mendelssohn's Wedding March. Yes, really. Someone was playing the thing on a piano in some inner room, and if it hadn't been pretty late at night, with me having nowhere else to sleep, I'd have turned and run.

The big, angular woman who was banging out the triumphant chords turned to greet me as I came into the sitting-room, and I saw a twinkle in her eyes. That was something, the woman who used clichés about rose-buds having been deadly serious. But it was all very trying.

When I had seen my room, we sat and regaled ourselves with gin and lemon. In an effort to keep the conversation off the subject of my nuptials, I said, "Now, which of you is Miss Marks?" It then appeared that the pianist was Harriet Marks and the sentimentalist was Mary Lane, and that they had lived together for the past three years, having been friends before that for "centuries." "I'm Darby and she is Joan," said Harriet. "There is such sweet companionship between us," said Mary.

I remarked that they must have a dreadful lot to do, living in that big house.

"Oh, we don't have it all," Harriet explained. "The upper floor is the flat of Mr. and Mrs. Arnsworth —well, Mr. Arnsworth at the moment." ("So sad, so terribly sad," murmured Mary, mysteriously.) "He's an actor," Harriet went on. "I've never seen him on the

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stage, so he may be quite good for all I know: but in private life he is not 'good' at all, or even nice, which is so much more important, I always think. Well, that's the upper floor. We have this floor, and then there is the basement, where George lives. You'll like him when you meet him: he is sure to look in for a few minutes before bedtime this evening."

In duty bound, I said that would be delightful. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Mary was raising her glass, and as I knew what that meant, and didn't want it, I plunged again into conversation.

"George? A relation of yours?"

"My boy-friend," said Harriet.

She was really a bit old for that, even if a year or two younger than Mary. I suppose that sounds terribly catty, but there you are. She just didn't look the type for that kind of thing. But of course, I quickly decided, she might be joking. I had been wondering whether it would be the correct thing to offer congratulations, but I decided it wouldn't, in case it was only her idea of humour—like the wedding march.

"George Gray and I have been what used to be called 'courting' for thirty years," she explained. "Or rather, we started courting thirty years ago. For ten years we loved each other with an ever-increasing passion, only somehow it never quite came to the point. The cat always caught a mouse, or someone in the house smashed a bit of the best china, just as he was going to propose. And so he never did. After the first ten years, I stopped expecting him to, and I think he

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forgot about it; but we've gone on, just out of habit, as if that was what it was leading to. One does get into a rut, don't you think? As a matter of fact," she added, "we shall have to be careful how we speak of you, or George might be reminded that there is such a thing as marriage; and I'm sure that would be a terrible shock to him."

That, of course, brought us right back to the subject I was trying to avoid, and I saw that Mary had perked up eagerly and was getting ready with her glass again. So I plunged into further conversation, with a vigorous counter-attack.

"And you, Miss Lane?" I asked. "Have you a boyfriend, too?"

She seemed to think it almost a shocking suggestion, though, age apart, she looked much more the type for it than Harriet did. "Me?" she said. "Oh dear no. Men are never interested in me."

"Oh come, my dear," said Harriet. "You mean you haven't made any recent conquests. But what do you expect, seeing that the only man you ever think about is your Brian?"

"I don't want men," said Mary, "because I have *you*, Harriet darling."

I didn't want to start her off on more smarm about "sweet companionship", so I chose "Brian" as a safer subject. I asked who he was.

"Brian Lane, Mary's nephew," Harriet explained. "His parents were both killed in a car accident about ten years ago and she has brought him up. A peculiarly

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thankless task, in my opinion. But I daren't say what I think of the boy—Mary will jump down my throat if I do."

"Oh, Harriet darling," cried Mary, "you know I wouldn't do that. Only it isn't fair to speak of him in that way to Miss Benson. Just because you've never understood him—"

"There you are," said Harriet. "I daren't even open my mouth on the subject. Just because you idolise him and I don't trust him, there not being the slightest reason why I should. You see, Miss Benson, if Mary and I were given to quarrelling, there'd always be this subject between us. But I'm so tactful that I let her have her way. According to Mary, Brian is quite perfect and absolutely charming. But I have different ideas of perfection, and anyhow I don't like men to be 'charming,' do you?"

I did not know whether it was to change the subject, or because she couldn't resist such an opportunity for gush, but Mary at once exclaimed that that was a terribly tactless thing to say to *me*.

"Miss Benson's fiancé is charming, I'm sure. Do tell us about him, Miss Benson. Shall we be privileged to see his photograph? I'm sure he is wonderful. And very, very handsome?"

If she hadn't gushed, I might have lied: but as it was I told the truth. "Oh no," I said. "Cheviot is not a bit handsome. Rather repulsive-looking, really."

Mary said "Oh!" at that, while Harriet chuckled.

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Then Mary pulled herself together and said there must be something—

“That’s just it,” I said. “There is. I’ve no idea what it is, but there’s something.”

That remark apparently meant a lot to Mary. “Of course,” she said. “I knew you meant that. Love is such a wonderful thing. The union of two hearts. The coming together of two souls. Journeys end in lovers’ meeting.”

And then—that having given her her chance, despite all my efforts—she raised her glass to “the happy pair.”

### III

It was becoming an occasion, and we got through quite a number of gins. They had the effect you would expect: Harriet kept a permanent vague smile on her face, Mary became still more sentimental, and I tucked myself further into myself and wondered whether Cheviot would mind very much if I took the night train and joined him in South Wales.

At about half-past nine, I heard a sound in the hall as of someone coming in at the front door. Then the inner door was unlocked and I saw a very large, ungainly man entering the room.

Harriet said, “Oh, hello, George,” in a tone which confirmed all she had said about habits and ruts. But the lack of any warm welcome did not matter, because George seemed, in the most literal sense, to be entirely “at home.” He blew a kiss to Harriet, waved a hand at

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Mary, grinned (without waiting for an introduction) at me, and proceeded to draw an armchair close to the fire. He talked in a loud and rather boisterous voice about the suitability of fires in winter—and there we all were, so much at home with one another that it seemed redundant when Mary awoke to duties and said this was Miss Benson, who had come to stay for a few days while she got her—well, Miss Benson was going to do some shopping. And thereupon George confounded Harriet's theory by saying, "Well, don't be embarrassed about it, Mary, old thing. If 'trousseau' is what you mean, that's fine—and only what you'd expect. My felicitations, Miss Benson. I've never been married, but I'm told it's quite the thing to do."

As that put us fully onto the subject again, Mary began to sound me out for full information about Cheviot. I gathered then that my cousin had told them nothing except that I was very newly engaged, and now trousseau-buying. They didn't even know that my newly-acquired fiancé had already deserted me, or what his name was, or what he did for a living. So, as it was all forced from me, I had quite a lot to tell.

It was, apparently, almost more than Mary could bear that there was no immediate prospect of meeting him, but her grief over that was quickly swamped by her sympathy for me. I only just stopped her from telling me that the course of true love never did run smooth.

By that time, Harriet had had her fourth large gin. It carried her past the stage of complacent smiles and

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into a cruder stage of humour. She was, of course, much struck with Cheviot's unusual Christian name, and insisted on calling him "Pennin'" for the rest of the evening.

The announcement of Cheviot's occupation caused quite a sensation.

"Oh, but that is too exciting," cried Harriet. "It makes me even more anxious to meet him. I've *always* wanted to know a detective."

"So thrilling, so romantic," said Mary.

"Yes, I've always wanted —" began Harriet. Then she stopped, and looked, with what I think would be termed a "quizzical" expression, at her glass, which she had just refilled. "No," she said, "not quite always. There was one time, of course, when I most particularly did *not* want to meet a detective. When I had committed my crime, you know."

It seemed obviously to be some family jest, but Mary wasn't finding it funny. "Oh, don't be so absurd, Harriet darling," she cried. "Whatever will Miss Benson think of you?"

"Hey, what is all this?" demanded George. "I dare-say I've done a crime or two in my time, but I wouldn't have believed it of you, Harriet."

"You must have heard all about it at the time, George," she said. "About four years ago. Or didn't you? Perhaps I yielded to Mary's entreaties and kept it secret, even from you. She would like me to be ashamed of it, I suppose, whereas I am quite ready to boast of it."

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Still distressed, Mary said, "But, Harriet darling, if Miss Benson doesn't realise that you are only joking—"

"It is all very well for you to say that, Mary," said Harriet, "just because Miss Benson is in with the police, but I am not joking at all. Though as a matter of fact I don't suppose the police would be in the least interested now, if they did hear of it. It wasn't the kind of thing that Scotland Yard never forgets. But for all that I have always called it my crime and I'm not going to stop now. It's the only thing I've ever done of that sort, and I'm p-proud of it."

She was clearly enjoying herself, and I began to realise that she got some fun out of teasing poor Mary.

"I'll tell you all about it," Harriet said. "Once upon a time— —"

Mary was flushed and I think she was all ready to make a scene. But actually the recital was stopped by George. "If the story has kept for four years," he said, "it can wait a bit longer. I'd love to hear the secrets of your awful past, Harriet, but : can't stay now—I've a little 'crime' of my own to see to."

He departed then, and Mary promptly said how late it was.

She was sure Miss Benson had had a tiring day and would like to get to her bed. So I was taken to my very comfortable little bedroom, and my hot-water bottle was refilled, and Mary fussed over making me comfortable, while Harriet leant rather uncertainly against the

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door-post (for, as I now saw clearly, she really had taken more gin than was advisable) and was mildly humorous about "Pennine" not being there to kiss me good-night.

#### IV

I spent most of the next day in shopping. At dinner I endured Harriet and Mary with better grace and even a little humour. After the meal, that became more difficult because Harriet said that some bright society must be found for me to prevent me from "sinking under my loneliness" and Mary of course said she was sure I wouldn't feel that, my heart being always full of the loved one. I don't know how I should have dealt with that—grace and good-humour being all very well, but there *are* limits. But just at that moment the bell rang.

Harriet said, "Whoever can that——? But that was the flat bell, not the one on the outside door. So it can't be anyone but Mr. Arnsworth. Oh, how terrible! Just as I was talking of bright society for Miss Benson. He'll be as gloomy as a sick hen."

I could well believe that, when Norman Arnsworth came in. As an actor, he presumably played the tragic parts. He looked as if he had lived for thirty years, regretting every one of them. But all that, though a bit cheerless, wouldn't have mattered if he had kept silent. For when the inclemencies of the weather had failed Harriet as an ice-breaker, Mary chattered on what fun it was to have a bride—to wit, me—in the house: and

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then the floodgates of Mr. Arnsworth's misery were suddenly opened.

"She's got some pluck," he said, "if she's going to be married. There's nothing worse, when it goes wrong."

Having got that off his chest, he was silent. So were we. There did not seem to be anything to say, really.

Then he started again, this time on another tack. He wasn't answering anything said to him, because nothing had been said; so he must have been pursuing some line of thought of his own, and suddenly making it public.

"I've been a brute," he said. "Stella—my little Stella—was happy before we were married. And perhaps for a month or two afterwards. But I've ruined that. I've been a brute to her."

He stopped; and I hoped—— But oh no. His countenance somehow became several degrees more melancholy, and he said, "I doubt if there ever was a man like me in all the world. I deserve everything. The most sensible thing Stella ever did was to leave me."

Harriet pulled herself together and said, "Mary, dear, I think perhaps if we had a little drink——"

To me, that seemed an extremely bad suggestion, because I was assuming that Mr. Arnsworth had had more than a few drinks already, and was in fact maudlin. One doesn't, surely, pour out one's personal miseries, with dramatic exaggeration, in front of a stranger, if one is not in that condition.

I couldn't remember which stage of drunkenness comes after that of being maudlin, but I had an idea it was fighting—— However, we were spared that, for

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Mr. Arnsworth said, "Not for me. I don't touch alcohol now. The drink has been my curse, it brought out the brute in me. It's too late now for stopping it to do any good; but I've given it up, since yesterday. It's all I can do, to show I've still got a fragment of decency left in me."

I've read somewhere that alcoholics should be eased off gradually, and I could imagine that a sudden change to total abstinence might have the worst effects: even to reducing a man to this state. I was trying to think of a tactful way to suggest that a gradual lessening of quantities might be wiser, when he turned to me, and said, with more gloom, "Well, I hope you'll be happy. They call it a lottery, but if so it's the kind when it's all rigged against you and you can't possibly win."

He stopped then. I hoped he wouldn't start again. I mean, when you are a bit exhausted, after a happy day spent in buying trousseau—

Mary said, "Perhaps a little coffee—" and got to her feet. Harriet said, "I'll come and help you get it." I thought it dreadfully caddish of them.

But I felt it would look bad if I volunteered to make a third in the coffee-carrying party, so I sat still, and for what seemed ages I looked at a picture on the wall of a large flat fish with black and white squares across its middle. I'm not a bit interested in paintings of fish, but I wanted to concentrate on something that wasn't Norman Arnsworth.

Then, through the back of my head, I became aware



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that he was looking at me—staring at me, in fact. You know how you can feel that kind of thing.

It made me most uncomfortable, and after a minute I just couldn't resist the temptation to look at him and see what it was all about.

But to this day I can't answer that question. The horrible man was certainly staring at me, but as far as I could discover he wasn't seeing me. If his eyes saw anything, which I doubt, I suppose they saw himself; or his wife; or some of the horrors of married life. But not me, anyhow. I was only what he was looking at.

The effect was so dreadful that I just couldn't face it. I didn't exactly make any plans to avoid facing it, but suddenly I found myself on my feet, saying, "Excuse me one moment," in a very vague way, and running, literally, out of the room.

### v

A couple of minutes later, I felt thoroughly ashamed of myself. So I gathered up my courage and went back.

He was sitting where I had left him, but the paroxysm was at an end. He had lighted a cigarette and was looking almost human.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "Er—did I interrupt anything you were saying?"

He shook his head without speaking. I really didn't care—provided he kept those eyes off me.

Then Harriet and Mary came back, cautiously. That is to say, Harriet looked in and then departed with,

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presumably, a favourable report. So Mary came in with the coffee things, looking as if she were prepared to drop the tray and bolt at the first threat. Harriet sat down with the cups in front of her, and said, with brittle brightness and to no one in particular, "Two lumps or three?"

As Mr. Arnsworth's silence continued, we gradually got back some poise. But we talked unnaturally and in jerks, and tried only to make statements which Norman Arnsworth could not think he was expected to answer. And of course we kept off dangerous subjects such as matrimony, wine-women-and-song, and happiness.

At ten o'clock he departed, making a great exit with his hand clasped to his brow.

When the door was shut behind him and we had relaxed our stiffened backs for a bit, Harriet said, "Well! But I suppose even that might have been worse. I couldn't think what he had come for, unless he had found out about us and was going to burst out into violent objurgations. I tell you, I was really frightened. It might, you see, have been worse than objurgations—he might have turned to physical violence."

I didn't understand that, and I said so.

"He has been quite as bad a husband as he made out," she explained. "Stella used to come down and pour out her troubles to Mary and me, and we did all we could to help her—including giving her some good and essential advice. At least, that was my idea. Mary took some persuading, of course."

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"It seemed dreadful," murmured Mary. "Such a very drastic step to take, and you never know what is going to happen."

"I did," said Harriet. "In that sort of case, I can see a strangling a mile off."

"If you mean that you advised his wife to leave him," I said, "I think you did absolutely right. I don't see how anyone could stand living with such a man."

"Oh, I'm sure it was the right thing," said Harriet. "But for all that I am very glad he hasn't found out that Mary and I were largely responsible for Stella going. If he knew that, I shouldn't feel safe in the same house with him. Well, let's have our evening drink and cheer ourselves up."

I thought that an excellent idea, my nerves being still all jangly. But Mary said, "Oh, not tonight, surely? We can go straight to bed——"

"You can, if you want to," said Harriet. "But I can see from Miss Benson's face that she is longing for a wee drink, and so am I."

She got up and poured something which I saw—thankfully—was considerably more than a 'wee' drink. Mary said, "Oh, if you are both going to, I mustn't be left out. But only a small one, please, Harriet darling." Then Harriet said, "Well, here's to happy marriages," and we got down to things.

I caught my breath at the first sip because that drink seemed the strongest I had ever taken. It positively burnt my throat. I sat there, thinking I had better go

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slowly with this one, and then I realised that in another minute I was going to disgrace myself and that I had better get out of that room as quickly as possible.

### VI

The next few minutes were decidedly unpleasant.

By the time I had reached the stage of lying on my bed, utterly exhausted, there was a hesitating knock on my door and Mary came in.

“Are you all right?” she asked. “You looked so queer when you rushed out of the room.”

The details were too repulsive to be gone into, so I merely said, “Well, I don’t feel very grand.”

“You look very white,” she said. “I do hope—— But I mustn’t stay, if you aren’t really ill. Poor darling Harriet—— She has been very ill indeed. I am quite frightened about her. It is so terrible. I—I have sent for the doctor, I simply had to.”

Callously, I decided that Harriet must fend for herself, or be fended for by Mary and the doctor. All I wanted was to be left alone and to lie where I was without anyone bothering me . . .

In the morning, I felt shaken but considerably better. That is to say, getting up seemed just a possibility, provided it led to my finding a cup of hot, strong black coffee.

In the passage, I met Mary, in her dressing-gown and looking drawn and tired.

“Oh, Miss Benson,” she cried, “it has been such a terrible night, I haven’t been to bed at all, I’ve been

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sitting up with darling Harriet—so worried about her, so dreadfully worried.”

“She is really ill?”

“Well, she is a little better this morning. Oh, I am so thankful. Now, she wants to talk to you. But you won’t let her get excited or worried, will you? The doctor says she must be kept very quiet.”

Personally—though Mary hadn’t even asked after my health—I wanted to be kept very quiet, too. Just that cup of coffee, and then an arm-chair by the fire: that was all I felt I wanted. But I could hardly refuse to go and see my hostess.

She was in bed, propped up with pillows, looking very ill. On a table by her bedside was a coffee-pot—and two cups. I daresay the second one was meant for Mary, but I couldn’t bother about that, when my own need was so urgent. “Oh, is this for me?” I cried. “How very sweet of you.” And I poured it out quickly—it was strong and black—before I could be stopped.

Harriet said, “Miss Benson, I have been poisoned.” I could only repeat, “Poisoned?”

“There is no question about it,” she said. “There must have been something in the gin.”

“But—but how could there have been? Besides, Miss Lane had that too, and she is all right.”

“Oh, but I wasn’t all right,” said Mary. “I felt very ill, only I was so worried about darling Harriet that I couldn’t stop to think about it.”

“She only took a sip of the gin,” said Harriet, “not having been keen about it last night. I drank about half

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a glass straight off, and I was terribly ill—much worse than Mary was after her small sip. That's the proof that it was in the gin."

"But it's a good brand," I said. "I don't quite see how—"

"I'm not for a minute suggesting that it got there by accident," said Harriet. "Of course it was added deliberately."

I said, "Oh, but that's—that's impossible!"

"I've been lying here and thinking about it," said Harriet, "through half the night. The last half, naturally. Were you in the sitting-room all last evening?"

I stared at her. It was a very abrupt question, and I couldn't collect my thoughts.

"But we were all there together," I said.

"Mary and I went out to get the coffee, and were away for five or ten minutes. Did you leave the room at all during that time?"

"Oh," I said. "Yes, I did go out for a couple of minutes. I found Mr. Arnsworth very trying—"

"You mean you left him alone in the sitting-room?"

"Only for two minutes."

"Quite long enough for him to have put something into the gin," Harriet said.

### VII

"Oh, no! It's impossible!" I cried.

"On the contrary," said Harriet, "it is perfectly possible. And he is just the man to have done such a

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thing. Obviously, he has found out that Mary and I advised his wife to leave him, and he is trying to have his revenge."

"But—but he took all the blame about his wife himself."

"Acting," said Harriet. It was almost a snort. "He had to do that, to stop us from guessing what he was going to do."

"But—but it is all so absurd," I cried. "Because of me, I mean. There is no conceivable reason why he should want *me* to suffer."

"I've thought all that out," Harriet retorted. "He wouldn't have expected to find anybody here, when he came down, except Mary and me. When he found you as well, he would have been annoyed, I daresay, but he wouldn't have altered his plan. As you had butted in on that, you had to take the consequences. I am sure that is how a man in that state would have looked at it. He couldn't give up the idea, when he had got as far as that, just because of one extra person."

"Oh, what utter—" I only stopped because there are limits, I suppose, in what you can say to a kind hostess whom you hardly know. But though I did not say it, I certainly thought it.

I said instead, "And anyhow, what would be the idea? Is Mr. Arnsworth going to feel that his craving for vengeance is satisfied because you have been nastily ill for a few hours—a fact that he won't hear about, anyway?"

"I daresay he won't hear about our being ill," she

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answered, "as that is all that has happened. But he'd have heard if we had died. I haven't the slightest doubt that his idea was to murder both Mary and me—only luckily for us he didn't know the correct dosage of whatever poison he used."

Mary said, "Oh, Harriet, darling, you mustn't work yourself up like this. You know what the doctor said about keeping quiet. And I'm sure you are making a mistake. I don't like Mr. Arnsworth either, but he didn't—I'm sure he didn't try to murder us."

"And I am quite sure he did," Harriet retorted. "What is more, I am quite sure he will try again. And next time he won't make any mistake about it."

I was surprised at Harriet, because she had a sense of humour—which ought to have saved her from nonsense of this kind. This last suggestion—that last night had been only a sort of rehearsal, and we were now all going to be murdered good and proper—positively made me gasp.

I said, "This is a bit melodramatic, isn't it?"

Mary said it was "terrible, terrible." But whether she meant that Harriet talking such nonsense was terrible, or that our all being murdered would be terrible, I didn't know.

Harriet said, "It is quite the nastiest idea I've had for a very long time. But we cannot escape it because of that. If we don't look it squarely in the face, and do something drastic about it, we shall just be three corpses in a row."

As a faint vestige of humour—of a grim kind—

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seemed to be creeping into her tone, I looked at her to make sure whether the whole thing was a leg-pull. But it wasn't, clearly. She meant every word of it, and was herself thoroughly scared.

"There is only one thing to be done," she cried. "Thank goodness, Miss Benson, that you are here. You can go to the police and tell them all about it. I am sure it is one of those cases where a personal introduction will save a lot of trouble."

I never like making a fool of myself, and I particularly disliked the thought of doing it now with the police. So I said, "But I don't know any policemen, except Cheviot, and he is miles away, in South Wales."

Though her support was not of great value, Mary was all on my side. "Harriet, darling, we can't," she cried. "So dreadful for Mr. Arnsworth, to have that said about him. I mean, supposing you are wrong and he hasn't done anything at all. And before the police found out, they'd have harried the life out of him."

"I shouldn't mind at all," cried Harriet. "He'll deserve whatever happens to him—and I'm sure that in the end that will be a hanging. Such a terrible thing to do, just because we gave some extremely sensible advice to poor Stella. And in fact, this proves how right we were in giving that advice. Now that we know the man is capable of murder, it is even more obvious that he would have strangled Stella if she had stayed with him."

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I felt that there was something wrong, somewhere about the logic of that. But I couldn't stop just then to work it out.

"I'm sorry," I said, with great firmness, "but I really don't feel inclined to make a fool of myself by telling this kind of story, without any evidence or anything behind it, to the police."

"If you don't go," said Harriet, "I shall go myself. Or rather, as I don't feel at all like going anywhere today, and the matter cannot possibly be left, I shall dial 999 and ask them to send a detective to take charge of things."

I felt extremely awkward about it. I was beginning to realise another of the disadvantages of being engaged to an inspector of the Criminal Investigation Department. I didn't know how the Department worked, but I was pretty sure that it was all knit together, so that if the story was told there, with my name attached to it—as it was bound to be, when somebody came and took down our stories—it would eventually come up to somebody at Scotland Yard who would say "Kathleen Benson? Isn't that the dame who is going to marry old Burmann?" And as the men at the Yard were bound to realise at once that it was all moonshine, there would be a lot of laughter, when Cheviot came back from South Wales, about "your girl getting the wind up" and all that sort of thing. And poor Cheviot, who could never stand being laughed at, would be simply furious.

On the other hand, Harriet meant what she said. For two pins or less, unless I could keep her quiet, she

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would pick up the telephone receiver and start dialling 999.

So I said, "Look here. Everything depends on whether or not there really is any poison in the gin. If there isn't there is no need for us to worry ourselves—no point in that at all. So wouldn't it be much the best thing to have the gin analysed?"

Harriet said, "I imagine the police will do that, as soon as they hear what has happened."

"Yes," I said. "But we could just as well get it done ourselves. An analysis, I mean."

"Do you know anybody who does that kind of thing?" Harriet demanded. "It isn't done by the ordinary chemist who sells you toothpaste and lip-stick, I'm sure. If you don't know of any analytical chemists, the only thing is to ask the police—and in that case you might as well arrange for them to get it done."

Of course I didn't know any analytical chemists—I suppose there are such people, but you never hear of anyone being one and I had no idea how to set about finding one. That seemed to spoil everything, just when I thought I had saved the situation.

But then I had another good idea. There was Cheviot's sergeant, Sergeant Kimber. He would be willing to help me—in fact, he would be anxious to do so, in order to keep in Cheviot's good books. I needn't say anything to him except that I had something I wanted analysed, and what ~~ought~~ I to do about it. Then he would give me the address of an analytical chemist.

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I decided that it would be a mistake to tell Harriet of this plan, because if she knew I was getting in touch with a policeman she would never let me off telling the whole stupid story. And I had no intention of doing that. So I only said I had thought of someone who would be able to give me an address, and although I didn't feel much like going out I would take a taxi—

“Very well,” she said, “only do please be quick about it. I shan't have a minute's peace till the police are in charge and Mr. Arnsworth is locked up. You had better take the two bottles—the lemon as well as the gin, because he might have put the poison into either of them—and then you can go straight on to the police and save time.”

Mary said, “Oh, I'm certain it won't come to that. Miss Benson is sure to come back with good news, and then we needn't worry any more.”

Harriet spoke to her almost severely, for once, telling her not to waste time talking about it. “You had better ring up for the taxi while Miss Benson is getting on her coat.”

I must say I did not feel in the least like this expedition, either physically or—so to speak—mentally. But it had to be done, to prevent worse things from happening. In this surprising mood, Harriet was capable of any absurdity.

So I made my preparations, and by the time I left my bedroom, there was Mary in the passage with the two bottles. “You will be able to get them into your handbag,” she said, “as it is such a nice large one. And

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Miss Benson—do please come back as quickly as you can, because I know I am going to have a dreadful time with darling Harriet. I suppose it is just her nerves—the result of being so terribly ill last night. I've never seen her like this in my life."

### VIII

I stopped the taxi at the nearest call-box and rang up Sergeant Kimber. He said "Yes, Miss," and "Of course, Miss," when I told him there was a little matter about which I wished to consult him, and he said he would be in all the morning if I cared to come round to the office.

Having seen him while Cheviot was on a case, I had the impression that he was a mere stooge, used for carrying messages and taking notes: but I assumed that he could tell me the little I wanted to know, and that he would make no difficulties about it.

I was wrong there, as it turned out, because Sergeant Kimber wanted to put on airs in Cheviot's absence.

There was telephoning from the entrance, and a constable, with much curiosity (and I think some appreciation) concerning the object of the Inspector's choice, conducted me upstairs.

At the head of the first flight, there was a door marked "Sergeants' Room," and I expected to be taken in there. But oh no. Sergeant Kimber had installed himself for this important occasion in a room which was labelled "INSPECTOR BURMANN, C.I.D." and he was sitting at a desk—Cheviot's, no doubt—and trying

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to look important. He had, in fact, everything laid on to impress me, from the expression on his face down to a constable who sat beside him, notebook in hand and pencil poised, ready to "take down in writing" what I had to say.

My simple statement that I wanted something analysed gave Sergeant Kimber his chance to show me what he could do.

"Quite so, Miss," he said. "And why?"

I hadn't expected that; and it was awkward. I said, "Well, it's curiosity, mainly. I just want to make sure that—that something doesn't contain anything but what it is supposed to contain."

Sergeant Kimber, who was probably less than ten years older than I am, tried to look fatherly and succeeded in looking condescending.

"A bit more than that, I fancy," he said. "Been a bit frightened about something, haven't you? Little bit of wind-up, eh? Now, you tell me all about it, and I'll be able to set your mind at rest, I'm sure."

"Oh no, I'm not frightened," I said. "Not in the very slightest. I'm just—well, I want to be able to reassure a friend who is rather frightened—quite stupidly scared, as a matter of fact."

Sergeant Kimber said, "Quite so, Miss," in a tone which implied that he had heard that story before. He just didn't add "That's what they all say." "I'll soon be able to put all that right for you—for this friend of yours, that is," he said, "when you've told me what it is all about."

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It was really most annoying, because I felt I had got myself into a stupid position. Obviously, I was not going to convince him that my scared friend even existed, and he was going to be consoling because he thought I was shaking in my shoes over some non-existent poison. He wouldn't report the incident to big-wigs at the Yard, of course—I would be spared that trouble—but eventually he would tell all about it to Cheviot: he would put it into "what happened in your absence, sir" and in the process of trying to earn good marks by extolling his own kindness and patience with me he would make it quite clear that the Inspector's lady was a silly panic-stricken little coward.

I certainly did not want that to happen.

There was, of course, one way out of it, and that was to tell Sergeant Kimber the whole story, making it quite clear that the only panic-stricken coward was Harriet Marks. And it wasn't that I minded doing that, except that it was such a silly story—only Mary had minded, really. If I showed the silliness of it, he wouldn't rush off and arrest Mr. Arnsworth—anyway, being ~~only~~ a sergeant, he wouldn't have the authority to do a thing like that. There therefore wasn't really any objection—

So I told him everything.

When I had finished, he said, "Have you got all that down, Constable Tonks? Then go and type it out, and I expect Miss Benson will be good enough to sign it if it is correct."

(I had an idea that statements to the police only had

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to be signed when they were practically confessions to crime and were to be produced in court: but I expect that was all part of Sergeant Kimber's little show.)

After the constable had left us, the sergeant said, "Now I'll help you, Miss Benson. Of course I'm only too glad to be able to stop you worrying. You just take it easy. We get hundreds of people coming in with this kind of story, and the Inspector doesn't bother with 'em, he passes 'em over to me. Nothing in any of them—usually it's not worth looking, even. So just you go home and stop worrying."

I was frightfully annoyed. "I've told you," I said, "that I am not worrying in the least. It is only Miss Marks who is worrying."

"Quite so," he said. "That's what I meant, of course. You go home and tell her to stop worrying."

"That wouldn't have the least effect," I retorted. "The least you can do is to help me to prove to Miss Marks that the idea is all nonsense. Nobody is going to be reassured merely by hearing that you don't think it wor~~w~~ while taking the trouble to do anything."

"Ah," he said, "but if the police went bothering about all the stories that are brought to them, the rates would go up. Take this one of yours, now: what we'd want, before doing anything, is evidence—is there any evidence that this Mr. Arnsworth wanted to murder anybody?"

"Of course not," I said. "That's what I told you."

"Of course, he might," Sergeant Kimber went on,

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looking very wise, "if he knew what those ladies had done, talking to his wife: but is there any evidence that he did know?"

"Of course not," I said again.

"There you are, then," he said. "Then what's the sense in bothering the police with a story that isn't founded on any evidence? Just somebody being a bit bilious—that's all it comes to."

"I know that perfectly well," I said. "And all I want from you is help in enabling me to convince Miss Marks."

"Tell her not to be silly," he said.

I got to my feet and gathered up my handbag. After all, I was 'the Inspector's lady.' "Of course," I said, with what I hoped was a shrivelling display of dignity, "if you don't want to help, Sergeant Kimber——"

It worked. In fact, I felt quite sorry for him, his position being extremely difficult. Here was I, apparently asking for the Criminal Investigation Department and the whole of the Metropolitan Police to be taken off their ordinary duties, and he knew perfectly well that it was all cock and bull, and if I had been anybody else he would have sent me about my business—only I was the Inspector's lady, and Inspector Burmann had a way (or so I imagined) of being quite brusque with sergeants who displeased him. So naturally he grovelled.

"Now don't you take on, Miss," he said. "Of course I'll help—only too anxious to do anything I can for you. Don't go getting me wrong: I wasn't holding out on you, I was merely trying to make things easier—so that

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I could help you more, you understand—by getting the facts straight first. Er—what do you want me to do?"

He was very nervous about that. He had got me wrong, and everything I had said wrong, and now I was being a termagant and no doubt he expected the worst. I daresay he wouldn't have been surprised if I had demanded that he should arrest Mr. Arnsworth straight away and charge him with attempted murder.

"I told you when I first came in," I answered. "I am only asking for something quite simple—at least, I should have thought it simple enough. I merely want you to tell me where I can take the two bottles—the gin and the lemon—to have them anlysed."

He was immensely relieved. "Oh, that's easy," he said. "I'll get all that done for you. You give the two bottles to me."

I was relieved too. Apart, I mean, from the fact that I had at last got the little thing which was all I wanted. It had suddenly occurred to me that I did not want, when Cheviot came back, to have to tell him that I had been to his office and got at loggerheads with his sergeant.

I therefore decided that I could now afford to be nicer to Sergeant Kimber. But it wasn't easy, because when I had smiled at him, in what I thought was the way the Inspector's lady should smile at the Inspector's sergeant when he had given her what she wanted, he immediately stopped grovelling and condescended again. And that was worse still, now, because the con-

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stable had come back with the typed version of my 'statement,' and so Sergeant Kimber had an audience.

"You leave it all to me, then, Miss, and you needn't do any more worrying. There's no need to fret yourself at all, now that I'm looking after things." That kind of thing.

And when I took the two bottles out of my bag, to give them to him, he proceeded to rub in his expert status compared to my abysmally amateurish ignorance—obviously, he very much enjoyed doing that in front of the constable. Moreover, he did it with a combined condescension and slightly sarcastic humour, which was extremely riling.

"Oh dear, oh dear," he said "It's easy to see you don't know how our things should be done, Miss. It's to be hoped there *is* nothing wrong with what's in those bottles, or we'll be in a nice mess. And what the Inspector will say, then—"

I hadn't the slightest idea what he was talking about, and I said so—without troubling to be "nic~~o~~" to him.

"Fingerprints, Miss," he said. "These bottles will have your dabs all over 'em, and other people's too, I daresay. Whereas if you'd known a bit more and handled them the right way, like the Inspector would do, or I'd do, or even Constable Tonks here would do— Still, it's no good expecting too much, is it? And anyway, it won't matter, I'm sure."

He told me he probably wouldn't get the analyst's

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report till the following morning, but he'd speed things up if he could.

"And then I'll bring the stuff back," he said, "so as you and the other ladies can have a little to cheer yourselves up again."

I wished very much that he wouldn't speak of me "and the other ladies" as if we were three fools together, with not a pin to choose between us. I wished he wouldn't condescend and be superior. I wished he wouldn't show off in front of his audience. But as nothing was going to shake him over those things, and any mischief there could be in it was done now, anyway, I decided that it would be better for us to part as friends. I felt that that was what Cheviot would want of me.

So I gave the smile again, just as if I had liked his little speech. "If you succeed in convincing Miss Marks that there is nothing to be afraid of," I said, "I daresay she will want to celebrate. And for all I know, Miss Lane will join her. But personally I couldn't touch it. I've completely lost my taste for gin, after last night. I shouldn't be surprised if I signed the pledge."

I daresay Sergeant Kimber had been nervous too, not quite knowing whether the terrible shrew that was me would send complaints to Inspector Burmann about the way he had behaved to me. So I think my "light-some remark," coupled with the smile, made him feel that we were friends again, just as it was meant to do. At any rate, he smiled back at me with some assurance. Then he apparently decided that it would even be safe

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to be facetious. "Better make an exception in favour of champagne, Miss: they'll be serving that at the wedding, no doubt."

### IX

The hours of waiting for Sergeant Kimber's report were not enjoyable. While Harriet was in bed and I sat in the sitting-room with Mary—who was silent and pre-occupied and rather tremulous—things weren't so bad; but after a while Harriet got up in her dressing-gown, and sat in invalid style on the settee, with her feet up. At first, she just took things easily and seemed glad to have Mary fussing over her. But after a while she started making humorous remarks about the prospect of early death with much pain attached to it. If she had been really humorous, that wouldn't have mattered so much; but it was forced humour, and all the grimmer in consequence. She was so obviously "playing up."

After an hour or so of that, my imagination got onto the same lines, and I began to wonder whether our "being bilious"—our all three being bilious at precisely the same moment—was really a plausible idea. Supposing Sergeant Kimber came and said that there *was* some terrible poison in the gin!

I was in that frame of mind when, Mary having gone out for a walk, George Gray came to call. He heard the whole story, roared with laughter and recommended doses of bicarbonate of soda a' round. That eminently sane reaction ought, I suppose, to have made me sensible again; but somehow it had exactly the

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opposite effect, making me still more anxious and miserable.

I was thus in rather a bad state when, at ten o'clock that evening, the front door bell rang and there was Sergeant Kimber.

He took out of a despatch case the two bottles, and put them down on the side-table where Harriet and Mary always kept their drinks.

"Well, there you are, Miss," he said. "All a mare's nest, just as I said it would be. There's nothing wrong with what's in those bottles, nothing at all. That one's gin and nothing else, and this one's lemon and nothing else. You can drink the lot and not be any the worse. Just as I——"

Then, seeing my face, because relief can be as big a shock as anything else, he said, "Very glad it is so, Miss. Very glad indeed."

#### x

After the sergeant had gone, we reacted in our various ways. Mary shed a few tears, presumably because that was her way of expressing joy. Harriet looked quite sheepish, as well she might have done, having made a fool of herself and everyone else. I felt a little sick, and then began to make plans for more trousseau-buying, since it seemed that I should want one after all.

At least, that was the first set of reactions. After a while, Mary dried her tears and began telling us that she had told us so. Harriet became quite gay, saying that she was going out the next morning—or at any

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rate as soon as she felt strong enough—to buy a new hat, by way of celebration. "I feel," she said, "just like someone who has been reprieved at the last minute—you know how the messenger gallops up, waving a paper with the Czar's signature on it, just as the soldiers are taking aim. I'm almost light-headed about it, which I believe is quite the usual reaction. Really, we ought to call in all the neighbours and—" She broke off and looked, a little longingly, at the bottle of gin. "No," she said. "No, I don't really think I could. The memory of last night is too fresh and terrible. I suppose I shall get back to gin after a time, but not just yet. I feel that even the sight of it in a glass would have the most dire effects."

"Well, I certainly couldn't touch it," I said. "At the moment, I am saying 'Never again'."

"Oh, I'm sure that is right," cried Mary. "I really can't think how we ever enjoyed the stuff. We must leave it alone now, Harriet darling, we really must. I think I had better throw the bottle away."

"If you do that," said Harriet, "one of us is certain to feel deprived of it and buy some more. It will be much better to leave the bottle there, as a reminder and an Awful Warning. When it ceases to be that, it will be quite all right to start again."

I wrote to Cheviot the next morning and told him all about it. Naturally, I did not mention my own temporary near-panic at the end of the ordeal, and I gave Sergeant Kimber a very good reference for kindness and attention: I merely drew a humorous picture of Harriet

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and all her fears over what had resulted from a mere bilious attack.

Then I returned to trousseau-buying, though I still did not feel very strong and I took taxis whenever the bus-queues looked unpleasantly long. That day—Thursday—was a particularly arduous one, as it happened, and I came home early. I found that Harriet was also exhausted, and lying down on her bed; but Mary had gone out to meet her nephew.

I was luxuriating by the sitting-room fire with my feet on the pouffe—such a much greater degree of comfort that I had ever attained in furnished digs—when the door bell rang. It wasn't till I was leaving the room to answer it that I realised that it wasn't the bell of the street door, but that of the flat. I knew I hadn't left the outer door open when I came in, so that could only mean that here was Mr. Arnsworth again, come down from the upper floor to call on Harriet and Mary.

For a moment I hesitated. We had all been feeling quite differently about him for the past twenty-four hours; and we had solemnly and unanimously agreed that we must make amends to him at the first opportunity for having maligned him in our thoughts. But for all that I did not in the least want to be alone with him. He might stare at me again with those unseeing eyes: and even if it wasn't as bad as that, he'd be certain to pour out miseries.

I stood hesitating, when the bell rang again; so that, short of being outrageously rude, I had to answer it.

I did, and there he was—the same, but somehow

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different. It was not really until afterwards that I realised exactly what the difference was: on Tuesday evening, his expression had shown nothing but gloom and self-centred misery—but now he looked wild and a little deranged.

He stared at me without a greeting, and then asked for either Miss Marks or Miss Lane. I took him into the sitting-room and went in search of Harriet. She said, "Oh dear." She got off her bed and started straightening herself. Then she said, "Being nice to people you don't like is so much easier in theory than in practice. It is ever so consoling to know that Mr. Arnsworth didn't try to murder us all, but now that it comes to the point I don't in the least want to have anything to do with him. Not because of Tuesday, of course, but simply because I never did like him. But now I must pretend to like him, mustn't I? After all I said and thought about him, I mean. What a pity it is that Mary isn't in: she'd lay on sympathy and sweetness in a way I can't possibly do. Do you think you can manage something, Miss Benson?"

I had imagined that I should sit in the dining-room till the visit was over, but Harriet wouldn't hear of that.

"Oh no, no. I need your support," she said.

So we went into the sitting-room together. Mr. Arnsworth was then striding up and down the room like a caged and infuriated lion. He turned at the sound of our entry and "struck an attitude." He must, I think, have done it rather well, because there flashed through

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my mind the words "Outraged Husband." Then, in a deep, vibrating tone, he said, "She wants a divorce."

Harriet said, "Oh well, I suppose in the circumstances that is really the best thing. It will leave you both free. Now, won't you sit down?"

As if he had not heard that, Norman Arnsworth said, "Three weeks today she left me. I thought it was merely that she was tired of me, that I had offended her, that she had misunderstood some careless word of mine. I gave myself a hundred reasons for the tragedy which had blasted my life. I was wrong about that. She left me because she went to *another man*."

He looked very fiercely at us both, as if daring us to contradict him. Personally, I had no idea of doing so, or even of questioning what he said. It seemed to me that his wife had behaved very naturally, and indeed sensibly.

"Yes," he said. "Another man. And now she wants to marry him. She says there is evidence on which I can divorce her. So—" (And, believe it or not, he got a break into his voice here.) "So she must have been carrying on with him, right under my very nose."

Harriet said, "Of course it is very distressing. But I think, Mr. Arnsworth, you must try to take the longer view. Your wife wouldn't have returned to you, I'm sure, so it is really best—"

"Right under my nose," he repeated. "She must have been meeting him every day, slipping down to see him

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every time I went out. And when my profession took me away from town—But I mustn't speak of that, I mustn't think of it. It would break my heart."

I looked at Harriet and she looked at me. I gathered that we were in agreement about the improbability of Mr. Arnsworth's heart being broken.

He suddenly said, very fiercely, "She used to tell me sometimes, after we had had trouble, that she was coming down to see *you*. Well, did she meet *him* here? Did she? Did she?"

Harriet said, "I don't know what you mean. Stella didn't meet anyone here, unless she happened to come when one of our own friends was here."

He paid no attention to that. Instead, he said, "Everyone is against me. It has been a conspiracy: you and him and her. I'm sure of it. I can see your guilt in your face."

Harriet said: "I don't in the least know what you mean. Who is this *r* in Stella wants to marry?"

"George Gray," he answered. "And don't tell *me* you didn't know. I can see you know."

She was terribly white. I went to her, thinking she was going to faint; but she pushed me away.

"George?" she said. "George? Oh no, no."

"George Gray," he answered. "The chap who lives in the basement here. She says so in her letter, says she has been living with him. He is old enough to be her father, but she must have been living with him for months, deceiving me, pretending—"

I judged that it was quite time for me to slip out of

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the room. It wasn't for anything like this that Harriet had asked for my support.

### **xi**

I stayed in my own room till dinner-time, and would have stayed longer if I had been able to think of an excuse. But as I couldn't, I made up my face—for the sake of self-confidence—sailed in, and produced feverish chatter at a great rate with the idea of showing how unconcerned I was.

I needn't have bothered, however. Harriet looked terribly white and grim, but she behaved with a dreadful normality. I might have known, I suppose, that she would keep her end up far better than I was able to do.

Mary, I gathered, had so far been told nothing. At first, I had no idea whether Harriet had played up before her, all the evening, or whether Mary had only returned just before the meal. But a little later Mary said something which told me what had happened since I shut myself in my own room. I might have guessed that Harriet would have wanted to straighten the matter out with George at once: or at least to know the whole and final truth.

"How unlucky I was," Mary said, "to be held up by the traffic tonight and miss George. Such an unusual time for him to call. And I only just missed him by minutes—in fact he was going home as I came in. Was he quite well, Harriet darling? He looked pale, I thought. And he made no attempt to stop and speak to

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me. So unlike him. Did he seem ill, or bothered about anything, while he was here?"

Harriet said, in quite an even voice, "I think he was a little bothered. Things not going quite as smoothly as he would have liked, I fancy."

Then she went straight on to talk about other matters, making her jokes in quite the old way. I couldn't help admiring her.

### XII

The next morning I had a telegram from Cheviot. It said—apart from something which I treasured even in telegraphese, because it was the first written expression I had ever had of it—"Please leave house and seek new accommodation immediately." I thought that rather silly, seeing that there was no longer any idea of danger, and for the first twenty minutes my independence of spirit was thoroughly aroused. Then I took up the paper and began to read advertisements of furnished lodgings and the cheaper hotels—not, of course, because I had to obey my future husband, but because it had occurred to me that Cheviot would soon have caught his jewel thieves and then it would be pleasanter to live somewhere close to his flat.

Indeed, I interrupted my day's shopping to look at one or two places: but they were not at all nice and I returned in the evening with nothing fixed.

When I got back, Mary fussec i admiration over my purchases with exclamations of delight—she really seemed quite a happy little soul again, now. But

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Harriet had changed. Perhaps the strain of "playing up" had been too much for her, after all. Or perhaps — But there wasn't any point in speculating about it.

She was silent all through dinner, and for half an hour afterwards. Then suddenly she gave herself a little shake and said, "Oh hell! Let's get drunk."

Mary said, "Oh, but Harriet darling, we said we wouldn't. You must remember: we agreed that we didn't really like it, after what happened on Tuesday, and that we wouldn't have any more for at least a fortnight."

"Well, I haven't signed any pledge, anyhow," cried Harriet, as she poured for herself a glass of neat gin. "Just at this moment, my only desire in life is to be thoroughly sozzled, and I'm going to start. Who's joining me?"

I said, "Sorry, I really couldn't face it. Recent memories are still too painful."

Mary said, "*Please, Harriet darling.*"  
Harriet stood with her glass in her hand. There flashed across my mind the thought that if she took several glasses at that strength, Harriet's tongue would be loosened and she would talk to us about George—and she'd regret it afterwards. But I couldn't stop her, any more than Mary could. She held up the glass and said, in a very wild way, "To men—to men and beasts, confound 'em." Then she put the glass to her lips. . . .

She was taken very ill within two or three minutes.

## *I Witness a Tragedy*

### XIII

There was so little we could do for her. Mary at once became hysterical and worse than useless. I—well, at first I was stunned with horror. Then I said to Mary, “Your doctor—what’s his telephone number?” She did not seem able to answer; but I saw the number of “Dr. Carmichael” among others on a list beside the instrument, so that within a couple of minutes I had got through to him and he had said he would come straight round. Then I went back to Harriet. I had literally to haul Mary away from her. But even when I had done that, there was nothing I could do that was any use. Vaguely, I remembered something about “treating for shock,” so I dragged blankets from a bed and filled hot-water bottles. It was something to do, anyway.

The doctor came. He knelt beside Harriet for a minute or two, and then looked up at me with a grey face. “Too late, I’m afraid,” he said. “Tell me what happened.”

I began to tell him, stammeringly, while Mary wept. While I spoke, I realised that he was pulling a blanket over Harriet’s face.

I don’t know quite how much I told him. In the middle of it, I became aware that a bell was ringing, somewhere, and that I had heard it ringing, without heeding it, for some time. I couldn’t stand that. How could I go at that moment and say, “Not today, thank you,” to some hawker? Yet it couldn’t be a hawker at

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that time of night. Never mind, whoever it was, I couldn't answer it.

Yet I had to go at last, the ringing became so loud and insistent. I staggered across the hall. I opened the door. Then I cried, "Oh, Cheviot, Cheviot," and flung myself, suddenly weeping, into his arms.

## CHAPTER TWO

# CHEVIOT BURMANN MEETS THE SUSPECTS

### I

**D**ETECTIVE-INSPECTOR Cheviot Burmann had travelled all day by train from South Wales. Having finished—in the course of the first thirty-five minutes—the crossword puzzles in the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*, he had taken out Kathleen's letter and pondered very happily over its terms of endearment. After that, he had re-read the middle bit, which told an absurd story of some panic into which one of her new friends had fallen.

When he had read that the day before, he had been just a trifle disturbed by it. This house in which a silly old woman had a persecution complex did not seem to be at all the place in which he would have liked his Kathleen to be staying. On the spur of the moment, therefore, he had telegraphed to her, advising her to go somewhere else.

Now, it occurred to him that he had not explained his idea in the telegram, so she might have thought he had taken the story seriously. Though how anyone could—

He hoped to goodness he hadn't scared her.

He still had that idea in his mind when he reached the flat. Consequently, he was, for a moment, very much upset and self-reproachful when she flung herself

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into his arms and burst into uncontrollable sobs. Yet almost immediately he knew that Kathleen, who was normally so independent and so sure of herself, could not possibly be in that state merely through his unskilful wording of a telegram. He said, "What is it? My dearest, what is it?" And then Kathleen, while still shaken with almost hysterical sobbing, said, "She's dead. Harriet Marks. Oh, just a minute or two ago. It's—I'm almost sure she has been murdered."

#### II

With a sudden sense of urgency which almost led him into roughness, Cheviot let go of Kathleen and strode into the flat.

What he saw in the sitting-room was by no means a novelty to him: the dead body, with its face covered, on the floor—the weeping little woman beside it—the doctor nonplussed at the impossibility of getting coherent information. Perhaps just because there was nothing for him that was new in the sight, it immediately brought him into his normal frame of mind. A minute ago, he had come to the house as a lover: now, he stayed in it as a policeman.

He said, very brusquely, "I am a police officer. What has happened here?"

The doctor looked up—with an air of relief at losing a heavy responsibility—and said, "A bad business, a very bad business. Sudden death resulting from a fatal dose of one of the corrosive poisons—probably cyanide. I think I should have a word with you in private, officer."

### *Cheviot Burmann Meets the Suspects*

Cheviot said, "Wait a minute." He went to the telephone and gave urgent instructions for Sergeant Kimber. Leaving the instrument, he saw that Kathleen had followed him into the room: she had got back a good deal of her self-possession and seemed to be trying to do something for the little woman who was weeping beside the body. That was all right: it would have been very difficult for him to take command of this situation if he had had Kathleen on his hands in a condition of hysteria.

He strode into the passage, glanced into a bedroom, decided at that quick glance that it would serve to give him privacy, and called out, "Very well, doctor. In here, please." There was only one chair in the little room, and he signed to the doctor to sit in it. Then he perched himself on the end of the bed, pushing on to the floor, as he did so, a number of articles of under-clothing which the occupant of the room had left on the counterpane.

The doctor was anxious to tell him what he knew already—that Miss Marks had had a mysterious illness in similar circumstances three days before. In view of the fact (unknown, of course, to the doctor) that the gin she had been drinking then had since been analysed and found to be harmless, Cheviot was not particularly interested in that, and felt that the doctor was wasting his time. And yet—of course it was a coincidence, and coincidences always aroused suspicion in police cases. He said, "There is just one thing I want to know about that, doctor. Were the symptoms of that illness related

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to those of tonight? Are you suggesting that Miss Marks took a milder dose of the same poison on Tuesday night?" (But even as he asked the question, he knew it was impossible, because of the analysis.)

"Oh no, no," said the doctor. "That is quite out of the question. Whatever caused the previous illness, it was not a corrosive poison. Probably there is no connection between them at all, almost certainly not. And yet—— You see, each time, she was drinking gin, I understand. That seems just sufficiently curious for me to draw your attention to it."

"Yes. Yes, I appreciate that," said Cheviot.

He ushered the doctor out of the room, and asked Kathleen to come in. Thank goodness she was now practically herself again, though flushed and rather big-eyed. He found himself thinking how well the flush suited her, and how extraordinarily pretty she was—and immediately upbraided himself for having such thoughts in his mind while he was at work on a case. She cried, "Oh, look!" in an indignant tone, and started picking her things off the floor. He said, "Never mind that stuff, I want you to pack your things and go back to the hotel. You can't possibly stay here any longer. For one thing, it would be dangerous, with unlocated poison in the place. And for another thing, I am sure to be posted to this case as I have arrived in the middle of it, and I mustn't think of anything else—I mean—well, it would be most unsuitable——"

She was re-folding crumpled articles of silk underwear, and she did not look up. But she said, very

### *Cheviot Burnmann Meets the Suspects*

quietly, yet in a somewhat strained voice, "I'm sure it will be awfully disconcerting for you, Cheviot, if we start our first quarrel at this moment. But I'm frightfully cross with you. I don't see why you have to be in my bedroom at all: but at any rate there wasn't the least need to push my lovely trousseau onto the floor. And as for all that about 'packing and going'—well, I haven't said the word 'obey' yet, you know."

He was utterly astonished, being not much used to people answering him back, and not at all used to it being done in that tone. For a second, he nearly showed his indignation. Then, because she was Kathleen, and so pretty, he suddenly laughed.

"That's better," she said. "You're much nicer, Cheviot dear, when you become human."

### III

"All the same," he said a few minutes later, "I don't think you ought to remain in this house. There is poison somewhere, and that is very dangerous."

"I wouldn't dream of celebrating poor Harriet's horrible death by drinking gin," she answered.

"At present," he said, "it would be a risk to take anything. The gin and the lemon seem the safest things, actually, since they were analysed and found to be free from poison."

"That was two days ago. They've been standing on a side-table in the sitting-room ever since, and several people have been in the room."

Cheviot said, "Oh— I'd hardly appreciated that. But

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it doesn't make it any less dangerous for you to be here. And besides—well, I can't have you around while I'm working."

"Oh, can't you?" she cried. "Then we had certainly better not be married, Cheviot. I rather thought I should be like Mrs. French, knitting admiringly while you smoked your pipe and got your thoughts in a muddle, and then I should put everything right for you by pointing out the one little thing you'd missed. But if you are going to turn me out of the house every time you start on a case——"

She was really making it extremely difficult for him.

"Still," she went on, "since, as you so rightly say, your attention mustn't be distracted at this moment, we needn't settle anything just now. I shall stay here, of course, but I needn't interfere with your work. You needn't bother about me; I shall have lots to do, ironing all these things that you've ruined. And in between whiles I shall do what I ought to be doing now, instead of wasting my time with you: I must give what help and consolation I can to poor Mary."

He found himself wishing very much that he knew whether or not she was laughing at him. Still, it was something to have the topic of conversation changed.

"Mary?" he said. "The little woman who was weeping? Were they real tears, do you imagine?"

"Oh, Cheviot," cried Kathleen, "that's horrid of you. She was absolutely devoted to Harriet."

## *Cheviot Burmann Meets the Suspects*

### IV

There was a knock on the door, and Kathleen discreetly moved a little farther from Cheviot. Sergeant Kimber came in. He said "Nasty business, sir," to Cheviot, and "Good evening, Miss," in a rather nervous tone, to Kathleen. "I've brought three men, sir," he said: "Constables Wilson, Tonks and Effingham. I've put Tonks on to dabs, Effingham is doing pictures, and Wilson is getting the lay-out of the room. The police-surgeon will be along in a minute."

Cheviot nodded. "The first thing, Sergeant," he said, "is to locate the vehicle of the poison. Miss Marks was drinking gin and lemon when she was taken ill, so possibly—But I've got to be sure. Rush both bottles to the analyst for a quick report. He probably put a private mark on them when he did them before—they are the same bottles, I understand—so see he understands that something may have been added since you brought them back. Now we'll go and see about finger-prints."

He went back to the sitting-room, being conscious—with thankfulness—that Kathleen did not follow him. Perhaps, after all, he had been successful in getting her to see his point of view—

Mary had been ousted by the photographer from her position beside the body and was sitting in a corner of the room, gazing with an expression of set horror at the shrouded body of her friend: now and then a single tear rolled down her cheek.

Going up to Tonks—the constable whom Kathleen

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had seen when she interviewed Sergeant Kimber—Cheviot said, “You’ve done those two bottles?”

“Yes, sir. Oh yes, sir, first thing, seeing that she was poisoned, apparently.”

William Tonks was in his middle twenties, a fairly new recruit to the department, although he had done two or three years in the Metropolitan Force: an ambitious fellow who was likely to get promotion, Cheviot thought, although of course he was as yet sadly inexperienced.

“Well?” Cheviot demanded. “What did you get?”

“Just what you’d expect, sir. Apart from lots of old smudges, which aren’t any use, there are three sets, two women’s sets and one man’s. The man’s would be Sergeant Kimber’s, sir, because he brought the bottles back on Wednesday. And I suppose one of the women would be Miss Benson, because she handed in the bottles same day, and the sergeant had something to say about her not wrapping them. So the other set would be the one we want.”

Cheviot hurried back to Kathleen. “Did Miss Marks mix her own drink tonight?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Neither Mary nor I felt like having anything, after having been so ill over it a few days ago, but Harriet said—well, that’s part of what I have to tell you when you have time to listen to it.”

“And otherwise the bottles haven’t been touched since Sergeant Kimber brought them back on Wednesday night?”

“Oh, Cheviot, I can’t tell you that,” she answered.

### *Cheviot Burmann Meets the Suspects*

"How could I, possibly? But I haven't seen anybody touch them."

Back in the sitting-room, Cheviot went up to Mary.

"I'm afraid I shall need to record your finger-prints," he said. "Just a part of our ordinary routine in these circumstances—"

Mary looked up at him with a quite expressionless face, as if she had not heard, or as if words were quite meaningless to her. But Constable Tonks said, "I got that lady to let me take her dabs, sir, wanting to get things checked right away. The prints on the bottles are not hers, sir."

"There's not much doubt whose they are," said Cheviot. "Miss Benson's would be one set, as you say, and Sergeant Kimber's another. The third set would have been made tonight when Miss Marks poured her own drink. Which means that the poisoner wore gloves, so we shan't get any help in this direction. Still, we'll have to have the point checked, of course, if only as a matter of form. As soon as Effingham has finished his pictures, you can take the corpse's prints and compare them."

"Ye-es, sir." That slight hesitation made Cheviot look at the man in some surprise. But he had done no more than notice that Constable Tonks's face was very white—or possibly pale green—when Sergeant Kimber leant forward and said in a whisper, "His first murder, sir—he doesn't fancy touching the corpse."

"Oh," said Cheviot. At one time he might have been indignant about that—either with Tonks for having

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human feelings or with Sergeant Kimber for giving him a job he couldn't do properly. But lately he had become a little more understanding. "Well, you'll have to grit your teeth and get on with it, Constable. Don't think of her as having been a person, but just as something with finger-prints on it. All in the day's work, and all that." He turned to Kimber. "Give him any help he needs over it," he said.

He then went back to Kathleen's bedroom, being careful to knock before he entered. She had put all her things away, he noticed—but *not* in her suitcase, which lay open and empty. Still, of course it must be very late now, and he could hardly expect her to arrive at an hotel in the middle of the night.

He got her to tell him all that had happened since she wrote her letter, and then he questioned her about details, getting her impressions of Norman Arnsworth, George Gray and Mary Lane, and eliciting the fact that George had entered the flat without ringing either of the doorbells—so presumably he possessed the keys.'

"All right," he said at the end. "That brings me up to date. Now, I think you had better turn in—I'm going to camp in the sitting-room for the night, and there'll be a constable awake on duty."

She looked at him with half a smile. "All for my protection?" she asked.

He hedged. "It's the usual routine to have a man on the spot for the first few days—in case anybody tries to monkey with our clues."

## *Cheviot Burmann Meets the Suspects*

“And the inspector on the sitting-room settee?”

“Oh well, I thought I would. There’s something rather precious to guard. And look at it how you will, there is no doubt about one thing: there is a murderer at large in this building. Naturally, I couldn’t dream of leaving you alone here.”

### v

Cheviot had instructed Sergeant Kimber to send a relief for the constable on duty at 8 a.m., and consequently he was aroused from restless sleep at that hour by Constable Tonks, who stumbled against the hall-table as he entered the flat.

Cheviot never wasted time over waking up. Within thirty seconds he had looked at his watch and got to his feet; within three minutes he reappeared from the bathroom, vigorously towelling his body after a wash in cold water, and ready for anything.

Constable Tonks hardly looked as if he had given himself the same treatment—he might have been awake all night. Cheviot looked at him severely, morning-freshness being one of the essentials in his code—and then remembered.

“Hullo,” he said. “I gather you still feel a bit sickly after your experience of yesterday. I know—I’ve been through it, and it makes you feel pretty bad the first time. But you soon get used to it and lose all personal feeling. Anyway, the body has gone now—it was taken to the mortuary last night—so you won’t have that to worry you.”

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Tonks said, "No, sir. I—I expect it will be better now. Thank you, sir."

He handed over a sealed envelope. Opening it, Cheviot found the analyst's report: a considerable quantity of cyanide—more than the minimum lethal dose—had been added to the gin.

So that was that. At least the poison vehicle was now located. But the knowledge did not take the case much further, for all three suspects had had access—or could have had access—to that bottle of gin since Sergeant Kimber brought it back after the first analysis. George Gray (if he had used his key to enter the flat when no one was about), Norman Arnsworth (who was left in the sitting-room on Thursday, while Kathleen sought Miss Marks) and Mary Lane (at any time) had all had the chance of adding the poison.

### vi

Cheviot decided to start his day by going to the basement flat to see George Gray.

At one time he had been tempted to start with Norman Arnsworth, for whom there was a just-possible motive—if he had really known that Harriet Marks had counselled his wife to leave him. But Cheviot never regarded revenge as very much of a motive: unless you had the kind of temperament which the Latin races are said to have, it surely wouldn't carry you very far, and therefore wasn't worth the risk of your neck. If that was logical, the three suspects in this case started equal, there being no known sound motive for any of them.

### *Cheviot Burmann Meets the Suspects*

That meant, to Cheviot's mind, that the case could not be started from the angle of motive at all—or rather that all possible motives must be uncovered by finding what had happened recently among the three sets of occupants of the house.

In that case, it didn't matter where one began—one might as well work up from the bottom as go any other way. And there was a slight advantage in starting with Gray, because he had connections with all the three flats: he lived in one, he was a frequent visitor at the next, and he had stolen a woman from the other.

So down Cheviot went to the basement, to start his day's work.

The door was opened to him by a young woman—at least, his first impression of her was that she was a young woman, his second being that she was a fairly young woman who thought the time had come to put a check on advancing years. She told him that Mr. Gray was out and likely to be out for most of the day.

If she was Mrs. Arisworth, he decided, he could understand something of the story; for she would make hay with men. With a certain type of man, anyway. With her jet-black hair, misplaced black eyebrows, and a sensuous mouth accentuated by overmuch lipstick, she was a very striking person. Obviously, she was well aware of the fact. Equally obviously, she was accustomed to make use of it.

To Cheviot, she was entirely unattractive, and indeed rather alarming. But men who liked women's beauty to be skin-deep—or at any rate didn't care if it was only

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that—could (if equalling her in self-possession) have a lot of fun and excitement with her, no doubt. For a time, anyway.

Perhaps because he didn't like her, or perhaps only because it seemed a good opening, Cheviot decided to see how she would react to shock tactics. He therefore said, "I fancy you must be Mrs. Arnsworth. I am a police officer. I suppose you know that Miss Marks, upstairs, is dead?"

She drew back, leaning against the wall as if he had struck her. All the natural colour drained from her face, so that the painted parts turned it grotesquely into a mask.

"She was murdered," he said.

"Oh no," she murmured. "Not—not murdered." And then—though surely the two remarks ought to have been in the opposite order—"Harriet Marks? She can't be dead. She can't be."

"She was poisoned," Cheviot said. "That is why I want to see Mr. Gray."

Her breast rose and fell quickly. She said, "Oh no. You can't think George did it. He'd never have dreamt of doing that."

"Oh, I wasn't suggesting such a thing," said Cheviot, lightly. "I haven't a scrap of evidence which suggests that he could be considered in that connection. Did you think I would have?"

"No. No, of course not."

"Still," persisted Cheviot, "you were very quick over assuring me— So you must have thought that the

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assurance would be of some value, and was, in fact, necessary."

"You said you wanted to see him because Miss Marks had been poisoned."

"Oh, I see," said Cheviot. "But all I meant was that as he had known Miss Marks very well he might be able to give me some information about her. Odd how these little misunderstandings come about, isn't it? I am afraid I quite frightened you for a moment. However, as we have started on that subject, you might tell me whether Mr. Gray was still on the best of terms with Miss Marks?"

"Indeed, I am sure he was. Oh yes, certainly."

"Right up to the last? You see, he went up to see her on Thursday and someone who saw him as he came away said he was looking very much troubled, or as if he had had a bad shock. Now, why was that, do you suppose?"

"I don't know. I don't know at all. I've simply no idea."

"It wouldn't," Cheviot suggested, "have been something to do with the same matter that made it necessary for you to assure me that he wouldn't have dreamt of committing murder?"

"No, no, it wasn't," she answered, very quickly. Then, recovering herself, she said, "I don't know what you are talking about."

Smiling at her—because he felt rather pleased at the success of his little trick—Cheviot said, "Anyhow, we now agree that you had a reason for that assurance you

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gave me. I gather that that means that you do not think it impossible that he murdered Miss Marks?"

She said, with sudden passion, "You are hateful. You make me say things I didn't mean to say."

"So long as we get at the truth, by one means or another," said Cheviot. "I think you had better tell me what all this is about."

"I've said too much already," she <sup>retorted</sup>, "and you take me up so."

"I gather," said Cheviot, "that Mr. Gray has been very fond of Miss Marks for a great many years, but that recently there has been a difference in his feelings about her. It seems likely that that change has something to do with his aff—with his falling in love with you."

"He hasn't been in love with Miss Marks for years," she answered.

For the third time she tried to shut the door in his face, but his foot was firmly in the way.

"Let's come inside and talk comfortably," he suggested. "We may as well, you know, because I shan't go till I've finished. And it won't be any use your sending for the police! So we may as well settle down and have a nice quiet talk."

She said, "I don't see why I should let you in."

"Oh, it's all the same to me," he said. "I've my over-coat on: I thought you might be getting cold."

At that, she looked at him steadily for a fraction of a minute, and he knew she was making calculations and plans. He hoped it didn't mean that she was going to

### *Cheviot Burmann Meets the Suspects*

use her powers of sex on him: not that that would have disturbed him at all, but it would have been a nuisance and a waste of his time. Hers too, come to that.

Suddenly she said, "Well, you can come in if you want to."

She led the way into a bookish room and lit the gas-fire.

"You're quite right," she said, in a different and more confident tone. "I was getting terribly cold, and it is nicer in here. You know, you took my breath away just now, saying that Miss Marks was dead. You ought to have broken it to me gently. It is so horrible to think of. You—you are sure she was murdered?"

"What's the alternative, when someone takes cyanide?" he said. "Suicide? I suppose you are suggesting that she might have killed herself because she had heard about Mr. Gray. But that is out of the question. If you are going to commit suicide, you don't poison a whole bottle of gin and then offer drinks from it to two of your friends! Oh no, there isn't a doubt that this was murder."

"I only wondered," she murmured. "You see, there are possibilities. I expect you will find out about everything."

"I'm sure to," said Cheviot. "But I never mind a little help. So if you've anything to suggest——"

She hesitated. Then she shook her head and said, "It will be better for you to find out."

"I will, then," said Cheviot. "I'll find out the thing

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you don't want to tell me about Mr. Gray, and then I'll find out about Miss Marks advising you to leave your husband. And everything else."

"Oh," she said, "if you know all that—— I wouldn't have thought Norman would have gone as far as murder, though he was quite violent to me at times, but of course it simply infuriated him when I said, right in the middle of one of our rows——" She stopped. Then, with rather an exaggerated air, she lit herself a cigarette. "It is hardly fair of me to be telling you this," she said.

"I'd have found out," said Cheviot. "As a matter of fact, it is one of the things I was going to ask you. So you did tell your husband?"

"I hadn't meant to, but it slipped out in the middle of things. And oh, wasn't he furious."

"I daresay he was," said Cheviot. "Though blind fury doesn't usually last, and therefore isn't often the basis of murder by poison. Now, how about telling me about Mr. Gray as well?"

Again her eyes seemed to be calculating. "There isn't much to tell," she said. "You see, when you first told me about Miss Marks, I felt certain she had committed suicide. And I supposed George would have to go to the inquest as a witness, and then he'd be made to tell about—well, how he had been quite fond of her in the past, and how he had then fallen in love with me, and—— He'd be made to look so heartless, I felt, and the papers would get hold of it—— You know how they write up anything like that. They'd say that he and I

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were morally responsible for Miss Marks's death, and—and it would all be perfectly horrid."

Cheviot could normally keep a poker face, but he felt this was an occasion when a slight raising of the eyebrows could do no harm. After all, she could hardly be expecting him to believe her!

"And that is all?" he said.

"Oh yes. Yes," she said, with something of a return to her earlier manner. "Except, of course, that I am sure George was worried about that too, and that was why he looked troubled as he came away from visiting Miss Marks."

"Yes, of course," said Cheviot.

### VII

He was deep in thought when he left the basement. By the time he reached the first floor landing, he had decided that to interview Mary Lane at that moment would interrupt his chain of ideas, and he would do better to go next to Mr. Arnsworth. He was at least directly connected now, through his wife, with George Gray.

There was a little delay after he had rung the bell of the top-floor flat, but the door was opened at last by a man who looked at him a little uncertainly, as if doubtful whether to welcome a visitor or repel a tax-collector.

Cheviot said, "I am a police officer, Mr. Arnsworth."

The man looked at him in silence for almost a full minute, so that Cheviot wondered whether Arnsworth had his wife's habit of calculating chances. Then he

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said, "Well, I don't care who you are. For God's sake, come in."

He led the way into a sitting-room. Then he said, "I asked you in because I had to have someone. Been alone all yesterday and look like being alone all today, and maybe the next day, and I can't stand much more of it. So even talking to you is better than talking to no one. No offence meant. All I mean is you're a stranger, and you've come on business or something, and I dare-say we could have settled it in a couple of minutes at the door. But I want someone to talk to. Mind if I tell you all my troubles?"

"I know about them," said Cheviot.

"Don't see how you can," Arnsworth retorted. "Not possibly. I haven't met you before, have I?"

Cheviot said, "Other people have told me."

"Other people don't know. Nobody knows. I'm cooped up here all day by myself. It wouldn't be so bad if I was a stooge in an office like other chaps, but I'm on the stage, and just at present I'm resting. Which means that I've nothing to do, not a thing. D'you know, I've been reciting bits of old parts that I shall never play again, just for the sake of hearing a voice in the room? If I didn't do that, I'd go off my head. And when I don't do that, I talk about it all to that portrait, telling the damned old friend about my troubles."

"That won't help you much," said Cheviot. "So if you want to get things off your chest, go ahead and talk. I enjoy listening."

"You won't enjoy this," said Arnsworth. "It's a

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damned grim story. I've been done brown by the man downstairs. Had for a regular sucker, it all going on right under my nose."

Cheviot said, "Yes. I know about that. Your wife left you."

"That's right. Knocked me endwise at first. I thought it was all my own fault. You know how you do, when something like that happens. I didn't blame her, I told myself I'd been a brute and all that, not taking enough care of her, not making her happy. Couldn't see how it could have happened, otherwise, because I still believed in her. Then I found out, it wasn't that at all. She left me because that damned man had got her. Been carrying on with her for months, right under my nose."

"I'm sure you must feel very bad about George Gray," said Cheviot. "Have you had it out with him?"

"What'd be the use? I shouldn't get Stella back that way, if I wanted her, which I'm not sure I do, now. Thought I did, at first. Thought I'd do anything to get her back. But would you want soiled goods back? If Stella wants to be a bitch—— Oh hell, I don't know what I want. I've been over it all a thousand times, and now I want one thing, and then I don't. Matter of fact, the only thing I want is not to be alone. That's why I'm talking to you."

Cheviot said, "I suppose you also feel pretty sore with Miss Marks and Miss Lane?"

"Eh? Oh, I don't suppose they had a lot to do with it.

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I thought at one time—— Matter of fact, I believe I said as much to Miss Marks, having got the idea that she'd let them—— But she's a conventional old dame, and they can't have done much that mattered in her flat. She doesn't like me, I know, and she's all on Stella's side, but she wouldn't have allowed that.”

“I don't suppose so for a minute,” said Cheviot. “And if you mean what I think you mean, there wouldn't have been any need for it, with Gray having his own flat just below. On the other hand, Miss Marks seems to have played her part in the matter. As you know, of course. Your wife told you, didn't she, that Miss Marks advised her to leave you?”

Arnsworth stared at him, and then said, “Look here, you're asking a lot of questions and saying a lot of funny things. You called yourself a policeman, and I thought it was something about my car. But it isn't that, is it? You know too much, you've been poking your nose into my affairs. So what are you after, what's the game?”

“Don't you know,” said Cheviot, “that someone died in the flat below here, last night?”

“No, I didn't know. How should I? I'm paying more rent than I should, because this place is called self-contained. So nobody knows if I choose to get drunk up here, and nobody knows if somebody dies down there.”

“Somebody certainly knows in this case. But you don't even seem to be particularly interested.”

“Should I be?” said Arnsworth. “Who is it, anyway?

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By jove, you don't mean—— It wasn't Stella, was it? You can't mean that?"

Cheviot said, "She was alive and well when I talked to her a few minutes ago."

Arnsworth said, "Urr. Funny, you know, seeing the things I've been thinking about her, but I wouldn't want her to die, wouldn't want anything to happen to her. That damned man Gray would be different, but—— No, I don't want anything to happen to Stella. Not that kind of thing. I'm damned glad to hear—— Who was it, then? One of the two old ladies? Not that luscious young female that's staying with them?"

Very coldly indeed, Cheviot said, "It was Miss Marks who was murdered."

"Oh, her?" said Arnsworth. "She's getting on, anyway. I wouldn't have liked it to be Miss What's-her-name. She's got everything a man could want—nice little bit of goods."

Cheviot said, "Did you hear me when I said that Miss Marks had been *murdered*?"

"Oh. Well, I suppose I did and I didn't. If you know what I mean. In at one ear and out at the other, because I was thinking of something else. Well, what about it? Who murdered her?"

"I wondered whether you could tell me anything about that, Mr. Arnsworth," said Cheviot.

"Me? Good Lord, you don't mean to say—— I don't know anything about it. Of course I don't. Hadn't the slightest idea she was dead, even."

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Cheviot said, more because it fitted in with a new line of thought in his mind than for any other reason, "Nor that anyone would be dead, there?"

"No, of course not."

### VIII

Cheviot walked slowly down the stairs, his mind busy with the new idea. He told himself that he ought to have thought of it before, because it was probably the crux of his problem: but he hadn't done—well, that was because his chain of reasoning had been so many times interrupted by thoughts about Kathleen. It was altogether wrong for a man in his position to have two things to think about at once. . . .

When confronted with the news that someone had been murdered in the flat below, Norman Arnsworth—whether he was then acting a part or not—had said, "Who was it?" Of course that was the crux of the problem. The cyanide had been put into a bottle of gin—and after that, anyone who drank a tot from that bottle would die. You didn't have only one person in a household drinking gin: at any rate, it wasn't so in Miss Marks's flat, where both she and Miss Lane normally took drinks every evening. It was sheer luck, then, that Mary Lane hadn't died as well as Harriet Marks. And come to that, Kathleen as well.

Once again, Cheviot's line of thought was interrupted by feelings which had nothing to do with his case. Then he pushed them aside and forced himself to keep to the idea.

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Not only those three might have died, but also anyone else who had happened to "drop in" that evening: George Gray, possibly, or Norman Arnsworth, or anyone else of Miss Marks's acquaintance. It was the most wholesale, indiscriminate method of murder imaginable: the murderer, whoever he was, must be a homicidal maniac.

The idea was so outrageous, Cheviot found, that he could not accept it. Murder just wasn't done that way. This murderer must—simply must—have had some reason for thinking the poison would only come to his intended victim.

• Or victims, of course. There was always that possibility.

Looking back over the details of what Kathleen had told him, Cheviot remembered that there had been some suggestion that uninvited guests were not very welcome in the flat. (It was a small point, really, and you couldn't base much certainty on it. There had been talk of asking someone in to meet Kathleen, which wasn't a thing you did when people constantly dropped in; and then, when Mr. Arnsworth called, the first time, Miss Marks said "Whoever can that be?"—not a thing you said when you kept open house.) As far as that could be trusted, it justified the idea that the murderer had no reason to expect a chance visitor to drink his poison. In that case—and particularly if he was someone who was sufficiently "in" with the household to know that no such visitor was expected on Friday evening—the list of possible victims was reduced

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to Miss Marks, Miss Lane, Kathleen, and possibly George Gray.

But even four was far too many for any sane murderer.

#### IX

Cheviot was still wrestling with that problem when he walked into Miss Marks's flat—and found Kathleen playing chess with Constable Tonks.

He was, naturally, astounded and shocked at such behaviour. That constable was on Duty—it was nothing to do with it that at the moment the man had been left with nothing to do—he should have been waiting for orders and ready to spring to attention when his inspector entered the room. He should not, most certainly, have been enjoying himself over a game of chess. Chess, indeed! And that Kathleen should be actually encouraging the man in that dereliction of duty, and playing the game with him——!

She, however, looked up at Cheviot with a smile and said. "Oh, hullo. Just keep quiet for a second. I think I can mate him in three moves."

As far as Tonks was concerned, however, the game was at an end, his principal concern, as he scrambled to his feet, being to conceal the cigarette he had been smoking.

Then Kathleen, seeing Cheviot's face, said quickly, "It is entirely my fault. I am to blame—if there is to be any blame—entirely."

"I should be glad of a word with you, if you can spare

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the time," Cheviot said. He knew he had not spoken to her so stiffly—anything like so stiffly!—since their engagement began. But really—!

He stalked off into Kathleen's bedroom.

"I had to say that about taking the blame," she cried, the moment she followed him into the room, "because you looked so furious. But if it is a crime—if that kind of thing isn't in the Police Code, or whatever you call it—it is entirely your fault that it happened, Cheviot. That young man is almost on the edge of a nervous breakdown, a case of murder—his first—having given him the horrors, he says. He told me that he didn't sleep at all last night, because you made him put his hands on Miss Marks: I daresay you regarded her as merely 'the corpse,' or 'Exhibit A' or something of the sort, but you ought to have enough understanding to realise what a terrible experience that was for a sensitive boy who had probably never seen a dead body before. And then you left him alone all this morning, with absolutely nothing to do but wait in the room where poor Harriet died. It made him completely jittery, and when I happened to come in he was next-door to breaking down. So I just had to take pity on him. He is a rotten chess-player, but at least the game did take his mind off things."

Cheviot said, very stiffly, "But really, Kathleen, in the middle of one of my cases—"

It was difficult to go on in that tone, because of the way she was smiling at him. It wasn't just humour—which would have been completely out of place, of

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course—and it wasn't just friendliness: it was, he felt, a triumphant sort of smile. But what she had to be pleased, let alone triumphant, about—

"You know, I seem to remember," she said, "that in here last night you kissed me. That was in the middle of your case, too, wasn't it? And if kissing is allowed, why not chess?"

#### x

It was, of course, no use being furious with her—though he could not help being slabbergasted. He had known that women were quite unscrupulous in the way they used their habit of being illogical, but he had never known such a flagrant case as that. As if kissing, which was a—well, natural function, really, could possibly be compared to a game at which you sat solemnly down before a board! And besides, if the two must be compared, kissing only took a moment or two, whereas chess was an occupation for hours. And kissing, although admittedly incompatible with work, was a thing you couldn't help doing in these circumstances.

But it was no use arguing or getting at loggerheads with her about it. So he summoned up a laugh from somewhere, and said, "Well, well, I'll dismiss the case with a caution." Only then, thinking he was doing it all with a light tone, he blundered into the very arguments he had planned to avoid. And Kathleen put on quite a serious air, as she said, "But kissing *could* take a long time, Cheviot, if you applied the same rules as in chess, with a limit of an hour and a half between

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moves. But if you don't like my playing chess with Mr. Tonks, and you regard kissing as a natural function which people can't avoid, I don't expect he'd altogether mind that being substituted, you know. In fact—" Then the sight of his face stopped her. "Oh, Cheviot, dear, I don't mean a word of it, and neither do you. Only please do stop being a silly old ass."

#### XI

After another ten minutes, which were passed pleasantly enough, he was still a little ruffled, but only a little. And he managed, with a great effort, to bring his thoughts back to his case again.

He told her how troubled he was about the "indiscriminate" manner in which the poison had been laid.

"I think that can only begin to make sense," he said, "if the murderer knew that you had sworn off drink after being so ill. But if I have got things right, Arns-worth couldn't have known of that, and Gray wasn't at all likely to have known—since only Miss Marks could have told him, and at their last interview that kind of thing wouldn't have been discussed. On the other hand, Miss Lane—"

"Oh, that is impossible," Kathleen cried. "I am absolutely certain Mary didn't murder Harriet."

"I am never certain about anything in my cases," said Cheviot, "till I have the final proofs. But on this point, by itself, it does seem that Miss Lane is the most likely murderer. In fact, I might almost say the only suspect against whom one could make a plausible case."

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At any rate, she alone knew, that day, that poison mixed with the gin would only kill Miss Marks.'

"But she hadn't any reason to think it *would* kill Miss Marks," Kathleen retorted. "Harriet had sworn off the drink, just as Mary and I had."

"Oh yes, I know," said Cheviot. "But in the first place, Miss Marks was extremely likely, by reason of her character, to be the first to go back on that. And besides—what I am wondering about is whether there was a lot more 'arrangement' about this murder than I at first thought. Miss Marks went back to gin because she had had the shock of that bad news about George Gray. So the question is whether she received the news at that moment at the instigation of her murderer."

Kathleen said, "How could it have been like that? Nobody knew that Norman Arnsworth would come down—?"

"I think anyone who knew Norman Arnsworth could have foreseen that. He had been bottling up his troubles till he was close to bursting point—he had been down once before to unload them on Miss Marks and Miss Lane—on getting his wife's letter he was practically certain to come down again."

"Oh, but I thought you always say that murderers only play on certainties. Being 'practically certain' is quite a different matter."

"In this case," Cheviot answered, "it wouldn't have hurt the murderer if the thing hadn't come off: the poison would have remained in the gin, and sooner or later Miss Marks would have drunk it."

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"If someone else hadn't drunk some first!" said Kathleen.

"If I am right in fixing Miss Lane as the murderer," Cheviot answered, "she could have removed the poisoned gin and substituted another bottle, till the right moment arrived. But what I am trying to work out," he went on, "is whether the murderer put pressure on Mrs. Arnsworth—or at any rate influenced her—so that she gave the news about Gray to her husband at just that moment. If there is anything in that, it is another pointer against Miss Lane, because we know Mrs. Arnsworth takes advice from her—at any rate she did when it was backed by Miss Marks. Come to that, it wouldn't have been impossible for Miss Lane to have persuaded Miss Marks—in all innocence of what it would lead to—to advise Mrs. Arnsworth to ask for divorce!"

"Oh Cheviot!" Kathleen cried. "What a horrible imagination you've got! Just fancy thinking up a story like that against Mary—the most harmless creature on earth. But if I know you, you won't be a bit impressed by my saying that, you'll want arguments and logical reasoning against it. Well, you said there'd be pressure so that Norman Arnsworth got the news about George Gray 'just at that moment.' What moment? You said just now that any time would have done."

"What I said was that a failure at the planned moment wouldn't much matter to the murderer, because a later time would do. But I'm glad you've brought up that point, my dear, because, by and large,

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the 'moment' for this murder was while you—and Miss Lane, if she isn't the murderer—were keeping away from the gin."

He stopped for a moment, arranging his thoughts.

"Now, let's set this theory out in proper order," he said. "For the moment, I'll stick to my present idea that Miss Lane is the poisoner. I don't know her motive, but that will come later: a motive isn't essential in a working theory. Well now, Miss Lane, by this argument, must have known about George Gray and Mrs. Arnsworth, although Miss Marks had no inkling of it. Accordingly, Miss Lane persuaded Mrs. Arnsworth to write to her husband for a divorce, naming Gray. She then laid the poison. The scheme worked, and Arnsworth came down in a state, as you would say, and told Miss Marks all about it. Miss Marks was very much upset, and in due course found she couldn't do without a drink. She asked Miss Lane and you to join her; and you both refused—after the Tuesday night episode. So Miss Marks drank alone—and died.

"Now, that all fits in very well, I think. But it raises one extremely interesting point. I don't suppose—if this theory is correct—that Miss Lane was at all pleased when you came to the flat as a staying visitor: you must have been most terribly in the way of her plans. Not being a homicidal maniac, she didn't in the least wish to murder you also. In that case, it was essential that you shouldn't be drinking gin on the night of the murder. Well—in that case, the incident of Tuesday night, which gave you a temporary dislike of the

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drink, was singularly convenient for her. Wasn't it?"

Kathleen cried, "Oh, Cheviot, I am sure all this is absolutely wild. I know it fits together and all that, and you are making it seem terribly real—possible, I mean—but I'm sure it doesn't fit in with Mary's character in the very least. I don't think she is even capable of thinking out all these horrible schemes."

"Wonderful what poisoners will do," said Cheviot. "They have a devilish cunning—or they wouldn't be poisoners. Supposing Miss Lane did some doctoring of the gin by Tuesday night—not to kill anybody, but merely to cause that repellent sickness and make you swear off the stuff? That would fit pretty well, too, wouldn't it?"

"It wouldn't fit in the least with the analysis," cried Kathleen.

"That's the snag, I know," answered Cheviot. "It was Miss Lane, wasn't it, who brought to you the bottles which you took to Sergeant Kimber?"

#### XII

While Kathleen was still gasping at the implications of that question, there was a knock on the door and Constable Tonks came in. He looked very nervously at Cheviot, as if he expected a delayed storm to fall on him. But as nothing was said on that score, he cleared his throat and announced that Mr. Gray had called and was very anxious to see the Inspector.

Cheviot went to the sitting-room and found George standing by the mantelpiece. He looked like a great

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friendly bear of a man, but his face was drawn and he seemed very much disturbed.

"I say, this is terrible!" he cried. "So it is really true, what Stella tells me! Harriet——?"

"It happened yesterday evening," said Cheviot. "In this room. There was poison in the gin, and she died within a few minutes."

Gray looked round the room with an expression of horror. "Good God!" he cried. "In this room, where we have so often sat." Then, as if he realised the extreme inadequacy of that, he went on, "You know, I can't believe it. I've known Harriet for about thirty years—been very great friends with her, come to that."

"I know," said Cheviot. "Have you been friends all the time?"

"We've never had a difficult word."

"And right up to the last?"

Gray hesitated, then. "To all intents and purposes, yes," he said at last.

"I know you called on her on Thursday evening, the night before she died," Cheviot said. "Suppose you tell me what was said at that last interview."

"Oh. Well, you know, I used to drop in from time to time——"

"This was one of those ordinary occasions? She didn't send for you?"

"Oh." It looked very much as if Gray would have concealed that if he could. "Well, as a matter of fact, I did have a note from her. Just suggesting that I should look in."

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"I know," said Cheviot: not because he knew, which he hadn't done, but because he thought it well that Gray should think he did. "I gather she mentioned a particular hour when she wanted to see you, when Miss Lane and Miss Benson would be out."

"Oh well, old friends don't want a crowd around, all the time."

His method of saying that, Cheviot reflected, was rather suggestive of a bowler sending down an easy ball and expecting it to be hit for six—but with just a faint idea that, given a little luck, it might take a wicket instead.

"There are some things better said in private, I agree," Cheviot said. "And the matter Miss Marks wanted to talk to you about was certainly one of them. She'd found out about Stella Arisworth, hadn't she?"

"Ye-es. Unfortunately. After all my trouble."

"Then you had a good reason for not wanting her to know?"

"Oh well, I'm not that kind of cad."

Gray hesitated: and Cheviot did not intervene, knowing quite well what was coming next. He had been through this kind of interview so often before. In another minute, Gray would say, "I expect I had better tell you everything," and put on an engaging air of frankness—while he told rather less than half his story.

So he waited. But he wondered why Gray wouldn't want to be frank. It would almost be disappointing to hear something that aroused his suspicions—just now,

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when he so much wanted to get on with his case against Mary Lane.

After a minute, Gray said, "I expect I had better tell you everything."

Smiling, Cheviot said, "I think that would be an awfully good plan. Only, while you are about it, you may as well make the account complete and quite accurate. Sometimes, someone will tell me a story with a few important bits left out—or a few inaccuracies put in—and then I have to do a terrible lot of work, checking it all and getting the true story. And after that, when I've got it all, I am inclined to have a slight prejudice against the person who tried to deceive me. Naturally, I think."

George Gray stared at him, and then said, slightly aggressively, "There's no need to say that to me. I came to you, without waiting for you to come and dig me out. Why shouldn't I? I've nothing to hide."

"That's grand," said Cheviot. "Go ahead, then." He sat down, making himself comfortable for what promised to be a lengthy recital. He wondered whether it would be wise to call in the constable, so as to get a shorthand note. But he did not think that was necessary. He expected Gray to tell him a lot of lies, for reasons of his own, reasons connected with the kind of life he was living and possibly some archaic ideas of 'preserving a lady's honour.' But he didn't at the moment expect a confession to murder.

"I've been in love with Stella Arnsworth for some months," Gray said. "And she's been in love with me—

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I've known that, all right. She has a brute of a husband, who doesn't know how to treat a lovely woman. I just can't understand how any man—still, I needn't go into that. All I want to tell you is that she has had a terrible time, and I've been able to be of some help to her. Quite a considerable help, she thinks. But for all that, she didn't turn to me merely because Arnsworth is an insufferable brute. We were made for one another, and once we'd met things were bound to happen between us. In any circumstances."

He stopped, and as he seemed to want some encouragement Cheviot said, "Quite so."

"Well, as a matter of fact," Gray went on, "we have been living together for quite a time now. When we could. Whenever Arnsworth had a show on, particularly if it was in the provinces. A bit hole-in-corner, of course, and awkward, with me being in the same building, but we've been very discreet. Not so difficult for me, that, because I'm an old hand—Oh well, you said you wanted to me be frank, so I'm not denying that I've had women before—they're a necessary part of a man's existence, aren't they? Anyhow, there it is: I knew how to do things, and I taught her to be careful. So we managed it all right, with nobody suspecting anything."

Cheviot said, "Nobody?"

"I wouldn't have trusted Norman Arnsworth not to use violence on Stella if he had had any idea of what was happening."

"Oh, I see," said Cheviot. "'Nobody' merely meant

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Arnsworth. I thought it might also have included Miss Marks."

He expected that to produce Gray's first downright lie. But instead the man said, "Well, naturally I didn't want it broadcast. And if you want the point made, you are quite right: I wasn't keen—not a bit keen—on Miss Marks knowing about the affair."

"I see," said Cheviot. "Why?"

"Because, as I think I said just now, I am not that kind of cad. Miss Marks—Harriet—hadn't the slightest hold on me, but we've been close friends for years, and there has always been a sort of idea that one day we might get married. More on her part than mine," though, lately. I was terribly fond of her—thought the world of her—but I've been only too conscious for a number of years past that she wouldn't hold me long in that way. Nothing against her, you understand, but one goes in and out of love if there isn't just what there must be to hold you. Years and years ago, I thought— But I was never absolutely sure, and so I just held back from the plunge. Glad I did now. Marriage between Harriet and me would have been a disaster. But for all that we've had a wonderful friendship. Understand?"

"As far as it goes, yes," said Cheviot. "But it hardly explains your extreme anxiety that she shouldn't know what you are doing now."

"I should say it does," Gray retorted. "Of course it does. It would have hurt her like hell to know, that's all."

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"You mean she thought you had been a celibate monk all those years?"

"Probably. If she ever troubled to think about the question. But I very much doubt if she ever did. She had quite a pure mind and that sort of idea wouldn't have arisen with her."

"Then what you mean is that you didn't want to lose a good name which you didn't deserve?"

"That's a damned nasty way to put it. A bit unnecessary, I should have said. I'd prefer to say that I didn't want to hurt her."

"Well," said Cheviot, "we'll let that go for the moment. Go on with the story."

"Oh yes. Well, we could have kept on in that way indefinitely, Stella and I, and nobody suffering from it. At least, as far as I was concerned, we could. Only somehow or other she got it into her head that while one part of her life was so rosy, there wasn't any point in putting up with another big part which was just the reverse: all squabbles and brutality, in fact. So she walked out on Arnsworth and came to me."

"Well?" said Cheviot. "Wasn't that much nicer for you?"

"Oh, infinitely. Of course. I had her all the time, then, and it didn't have to be tip-and-run. I'm not denying the advantages for a minute. But at the same time, it was deucedly awkward—being all in one house, I mean."

"Because," suggested Cheviot, slyly, "Mr. Arnsworth could easily have found out where his wife was, and

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then he would have come down and made trouble with you?"

"Oh. Well, there was that, of course, though I could push Arnsworth's face through the back of his head with one hand. But—well, you see, it meant Stella going in and out of my place, up the area steps which were just under Harriet's windows."

"So Miss Marks might have seen her, and been hurt," said Cheviot. "You have a kind heart, Mr. Gray."

"That sounds damned sarcastic. I don't see that there's any call for it. I've told you I was very fond of Harriet. I wouldn't have hurt her for worlds."

"Then why didn't you move? Or take a place for Mrs. Arnsworth?"

"I've been meaning to. But, you see, Stella suddenly got the idea that Arnsworth would divorce her and then we could be married. Goodness knows why she wanted that. I mean, some women, of course— Especially those wanting kids. But Stella had no ideas of that sort and she isn't a bit conventional. So I can't see \_\_\_\_\_"

"All her own idea, do you think?" Cheviot suggested.

There seemed no doubt that Gray was startled by that remark.

"Eh?" he said. "What d'you mean? Who'd have put her up to a thing like that?"

"I was just wondering," said Cheviot. "I don't know that anybody would, but you seemed to have something

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that puzzled you, so I put up the obvious explanation. You know what girls are, Mr. Gray—obviously you do. They like to let their hair down and ‘tell all about it’ to the bosom friend or the trusted confidant. And as a matter of fact,” he went on, “I happen to know that Mrs. Arnsworth does that kind of thing. She didn’t walk out on Arnsworth without advice on the subject.”

“Didn’t she?” cried Gray. “She didn’t tell me of anybody. Who was it?”

“Miss Marks and Miss Lane. They advised her to leave her husband. But of course, Miss Marks didn’t know then about you—that you came into the picture in any way.”

“Good Lord!” cried Gray. “Is that a fact? Do you know it for certain?”

“Miss Marks herself told Miss Benson,” Cheviot explained. “That’s why I was wondering whether Miss Lane had anything to do with this divorce idea.”

“But—but she couldn’t have done. That would imply that she knew about me.”

“Not necessarily. She would only have had to know that Mrs. Arnsworth was interested in some man apart from her husband. Or, of course, she may have known it was you and yet not have told Miss Marks.”

At the same time, the comment set him wondering, for here was another snag to his theory. If Miss Lane knew about George Gray, why hadn’t she told Miss Marks herself, at the desired moment, instead of relying on the roundabout Mrs. Arnsworth—Norman Arnsworth—Miss Marks route?

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Still, there were always snags in first theories—the fun of his job lay in overcoming them.

“Anyhow,” he said, “go on about this idea of your marrying Mrs. Arnsworth. It was her idea, but it didn’t appeal to you, I gather?”

“That’s right, it didn’t.”

“Why not? You say you dislike hole-in-corner methods——”

“Oh well, I dislike a lot of things. Settling down and signing contracts, for instance. Life sentences. All that kind of thing.”

“Including heavy damages against the co-responsible,” Cheviot suggested.

“That comes into it, of course. But don’t get me wrong. I’m dead keen on Stella—very much in love with her, in fact—and I know we can be happy. But I’m thirty years older than she is, and I’ve got set into a way of life which doesn’t include marriage. So naturally I’m shy of that. I may come round to the idea in time, but at the moment——”

“You’ve said all this to Mrs. Arnsworth?”

“In a modified form. You have to be careful how you say that kind of thing to women: they’ve a way of misunderstanding. But I said something, and I had the impression that she understood. Only I was wrong there. Because the next thing I heard was that she had written a letter to Arnsworth, asking for the divorce and naming me!”

“I’m sure you felt that was a bit high-handed,” said Cheviot.

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"I was perfectly furious. Nobody runs my life for me, I can assure you. Really, I suppose, that is why I object to marriage: a wife thinks she has a right to make decisions."

"Mrs. Arnsworth had training in that. I expect she thought you would respond better to a *fait accompli*."

"She was wrong, then," Gray retorted. "Luckily, I'm not given to blowing off, and anyway I'm very fond of her: so I didn't say a lot. But it put me in a hole, all the same."

"Forcing you to marry her?"

"I daresay I'll get used to the idea of that, and more or less tolerate it: though I still think it's a silly idea, when you can have all you want without. But I don't like the publicity."

"Particularly as that affected Miss Marks," said Cheviot. "In the circumstances, Mr. Gray, it is a good thing for you that your wife died."

George Gray's jaw dropped. "My wife? Did you say my wife?"

"The only reasonable explanation of all this," said Cheviot, "is that you were married to Harriet Marks. You'd better tell me all about it. Only first I must warn you that anything you say may be taken down in writing and used in evidence."

### XIII

Cheviot went to the door and called for Constable Tonks. "Your note-book," he said. "I want a record of this. Now, Mr. Gray."

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"I never heard such nonsense," George declared. "Of course I wasn't married to Harriet. I have never been married to anyone, and things are exactly as I told you. I suppose it is your job, if not your nature, to believe everybody's a liar, but it must put you wrong sometimes. It has done now. I tell you I have never been married."

"I see," said Cheviot. "Or rather, I hear. You do see, don't you, that it would make your story reasonable? It would account for both the odd things in it—your super-anxiety that Miss Marks shouldn't know of your intrigue with Mrs. Arnsworth, and your reluctance to letting Mrs. Arnsworth push you toward marriage. And it would also explain Miss Marks's sudden death."

"That," said Gray, "is practically an accusation. I doubt if you have the slightest right to make it. And certainly you haven't any justification."

Cheviot said, quietly, "You have a key to Miss Marks's flat, haven't you?"

"Oh yes. She gave it to me when I first came."

"So you could enter her flat at any time. If, for example, you had seen all the occupants go out—as you could do, I imagine, from your front windows—you could then go into her flat, and do what you liked there, and come out again, without anybody knowing you had been there."

"Oh, I suppose I could if I wanted to. But if I call and she's not in, I go away at once."

"Naturally, in the normal course," said Cheviot.

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"But if you had a particular reason for being alone there—in the sitting-room—for a few moments——"

"Oh, I know what you mean, perfectly well," said Gray. "You mean I could have gone there and left the poison behind. But I didn't. You are quite wrong. You——"

"How did you know," Cheviot interrupted, "that this was a poisoning case, Mr. Gray? I haven't told you."

"Miss Lane told me, while I was waiting for you to come in, just now. Don't be so damned suspicious."

"It is you who aroused my suspicions," Cheviot retorted, "with that fantastic story of yours. Well, I shall leave this matter for the moment, Mr. Gray. I expect I shall have more questions to ask you later. My advice to you is that you should answer them frankly and truthfully."

"I'm not the liar you think me," said Gray. "As you will soon find out. You had better go off to Somerset House and turn up the marriage records: you won't find one in my name, that's certain."

#### **xiv**

Cheviot let him go, and sent Tonks to type the short-hand note. Then he settled himself in the sitting-room and began to think the whole thing out, in the light of this latest suspicion.

Somerset House, he knew, would hardly help. For one thing, it only recorded marriages performed in this country; for another, it didn't of course help you to

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trace people who had changed their names. And it was quite certain that a marriage between George Gray and Harriet Marks wouldn't be found there in any obvious fashion—if there had been any chance of that, Gray would never have issued that challenge.

The question was whether such a marriage, under any names at all, had ever taken place. At first hearing, it had seemed the obvious solution: and he had, he knew, jumped at it with rather more hurry than the obvious ever deserved. What was the alternative? That Gray's story was true, that he really had only been moved by a chivalrous desire to avoid giving anguish to Harriet Marks—and that he really had only resisted marriage with Stella Arnsworth because he had the confirmed habits of a bachelor—a somewhat wandering bachelor? Of course, if you heard that said of a man in private life, you wouldn't turn it down as impossible. Only it wasn't as good in a police case as this other idea of marriage leading to murder.

What would the theory mean? That George Gray and Harriet Marks had married, oh, perhaps some twenty or thirty years ago, and then had separated. No divorce, probably, but just a separation. Then in later life—it had happened often enough—they had met again and liked each other, and considered a new start. But by that time they had both grown cautious—there mustn't be another failure. So a try-out seemed advisable: not a connubial try-out but an experiment in companionship, with George living close to Harriet—why not in the empty flat below?—and visiting her

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every day. If that worked, other things could follow: if it didn't, the experiment could end without any harm being done and without any hearts being broken.

Yes, the idea of such a try-out was reasonable enough: and at least it explained what otherwise seemed an odd relationship.

But it had not worked. At least, even if Miss Marks had had a warm sense of companionship for George, George's thoughts had wandered—they had gone a flight higher upstairs. So there had come the liaison, the talk of marriage—which was so impossible while Harriet lived—and eventually the murder.

Oh yes, it was all very reasonable, very satisfactory in the way it explained things. But there were difficulties.

The first was the statement about her relations with Gray which Miss Marks had volunteered to Kathleen. If that was a gratuitous set of lies, what was the point of it? Kathleen was a stranger, whom Miss Marks was not going to know for more than a week or two. There wasn't the slightest need to tell her anything about Gray, except that he was "a friend." Why on earth, if she had married him and left him, should she say that they had once been in love with one another, but Gray had never come up to scratch with a proposal?

Then there was another difficulty, not so much to the idea of that marriage but as to the murder-theory. If Gray, with that motive for murder—and there was no denying its sufficiency as a motive—had planned to poison Harriet Marks, he wouldn't have done it in that

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way, which might involve two other deaths. With his key to the flat, and his observation windows, he could have got in at any time when the flat was empty, and then he could have laid his poison where he wished. He knew all Miss Marks's habits and he could easily have found something—a bottle of medicine in her bedroom, for instance—which she alone would take.

No, it didn't really wash. A pity, really, that a motive of that quality should be wasted; but there it was.

### XV

Being now thrown back again on to the idea that the murder had been committed by Miss Lane, Cheviot regretted that he had not continued on that line, without letting himself to be side-tracked.

However, to make up for lost time he hurried down to the basement. George Gray opened the door and said, "Hullo, you haven't wasted long. Or have you come to apologise?"

"It is Mrs. Arnsworth I want to see now."

"Oh, just as you like. But about that matter she only knows what I've told her, so you won't learn anything new——"

"I'm learning new things all the time," Cheviot said. "It's like finding new bits of a jig-saw puzzle—they all fit in eventually. Is Mrs. Arnsworth in your sitting-room?"

She was, and she was looking flushed, so that Cheviot ceased to regret that he had not spoken to her again

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before Gray had had the opportunity to tell her what had happened upstairs: he always did better with witnesses—especially the women—when they had heard a little and become rattled.

"As you obviously know, Mrs. Arnsworth," he said, "I have been talking to Mr. Gray. Some of the things he told me may not have been relevant, but I am interested in everything. Your preference for the married state, for instance—previous experiences didn't put you off?"

Gray put in, "Do you have to discuss that kind of thing with her?"

Stella's flush deepened, but she said, "I was quite sure of George: I knew he wouldn't ill-treat me."

"And it was just a strong preference, without any particular reason for it? You weren't turned from that, even when he said he wasn't keen?"

It was obvious that this line of questioning disturbed her very much.

"I—I just wanted it," she said.

"Yes," said Cheviot. "All your own idea, I suppose?"

"I—what do you mean?"

"I wondered whether someone had lectured you on the advantages of observing the conventions—that kind of thing."

"Well—people do think that."

"Lots of them do," said Cheviot. "I do myself, for one. I think all the people in this house would—apart from Mr. Gray. I'm sure Miss Lane, for instance, would be very strict about it."

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Stella Arnsworth said, "Yes. Oh yes."

"You know her views, I expect? Miss Lane's, I mean."

"Yes, I've talked to her."

"On the question of whether you should have a divorce?"

"I wanted someone's advice."

"And she gave it. Does that mean that she knew—or you told her—about Mr. Gray?"

"I only said there was someone I was fond of. I didn't think it would do to say who it was. She said it was much better in that case to get a divorce and start again."

"I see," said Cheviot. "And it was thus by her advice that you eventually wrote to your husband?"

"Yes. Yes, that's what she said I ought to do."

"Naming the man you were—interested in?"

"She didn't exactly say that. She said that if there was—if it was to be that kind of divorce, I ought to make things quite plain."

"Yes, I see," said Cheviot.

### xvi

There was there some direct evidence to support this theory against Mary Lane. At least she would have known that Norman Arnsworth would hear the news—and by saying "You'd better write at once," she could have known also *when* he would hear it. And if from some other source she knew, or guessed, that it was George Gray with whom the girl was in love—

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Obviously, he had now to go ahead on those lines, and hear what Miss Lane had to say for herself. He therefore went in search of Constable Tonks. By this time the man ought to have finished typing Gray's statement—it wasn't wanted so badly now, anyhow—and he must take notes of the interview with Miss Lane. It was important that that should be formal and austere, with the warning and note-taking and all the paraphernalia: the more formal it was, the more scared the woman would be and the more she would talk.

He found Constable Tonks in the dining-room, with Kathleen. His first thought was "Chess again, dammit"; but he realised that it wasn't usual to stand, even if leaning over a table, while playing chess. Then he realised that their heads were very close—and that young Tonks appeared to be holding Kathleen's hand.

For a fraction of a second Cheviot's world turned over. Then trust and commonsense reassured themselves.

Kathleen looked up, and smiled, and said, "Hullo. It's not chess, this time. This is practical police business. I want to know the science behind it all, so Mr. Tonks is giving me a lesson in dac-dactyloscopy."

Having never, as far as he knew, heard that word before, Cheviot was completely at a loss. But then Tonks said, "Dabs, sir. I was just showing Miss Benson how we take them."

"Oh," said Cheviot. "Oh." He wasn't going to make a fool of himself in front of Constable Tonks. So he

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pulled himself together and said, "Ah, yes, it is an interesting subject." He looked down at the impressions of Kathleen's fingers, made on a piece of paper. He said, "You've got whorls." Tonks—damn him—said, "No, sir, it's a central pocket loop." With a great effort, Cheviot produced a sort of smile at the constable and said, "Well, you've studied the subject more recently than I have, Constable." He turned to Kathleen and laughed: damn Constable Tonks, but he had to keep his end up. "Don't forget," he said. "Whichever frock you wear, you've always got a central pocket loop on you." Damn Constable Tonks!

#### XVII

Having got that over, Cheviot said, "I'll see Miss Lane, now. Go and bring her into the sitting-room, Constable. And stay afterwards, with your notebook."

Then, as soon as they were alone, he said to Kathleen, "Well, I hope you have had an interesting time." She said, "Aren't you a silly old thing, Cheviot?" and laughed. He knew it was affectionate laughter, but he also knew that it meant she had been aware that he had been "playing-up." Dammit!

He went into the sitting-room, to wait there for Miss Lane. When she came, he thought she looked terribly ill. But it wasn't his business to decide whether that was grief, conscience or fear. What he wanted was not the answer to psychological questions, but a little direct evidence.

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He said, "Miss Lane, it is my duty to warn you that what you say may be taken down in writing and used in evidence. You understand that, I hope? Now, have you anything to tell me about Miss Marks's death?"

What she said was not an answer at all. "We've been such wonderful friends, for years and years. There was always the sweetest companionship between us, and—and—"

No confession, then. Very well, he would start questioning her.

"When did you first meet her?"

"We taught in a school together for years and years—St. Ruth's at Bedlington. I wasn't any good, of course, I only taught the smallest children and I could never keep order. But Harriet was brilliant, a splendid classical scholar and a wonderful teacher. I never knew why she ever troubled with me, I suppose she was sorry for me, with all my difficulties. She always gave me such a lot of help, and even had me in her boarding-house. Then Harriet came into some money and bought herself an annuity—this was three years ago—and said she was going to retire. I had wanted to retire for years, because I was so helpless with children and never able to do anything the right way. Only of course I couldn't, not having any money till I reached my superannuation. But darling Harriet—she was always so kind and so wonderfully good to me—darling Harriet said wouldn't I leave the school and come and live with her. I did try to say no, but— Of course it was wicked of

me, because it meant living on her money, but she said I could do all the work, like a housekeeper, and I'd earn my keep that way if I felt like that about it, and what she wanted was not to be alone but always to have a companion, and she'd rather have me than anyone. So we did that and it has worked very well. Perfectly, I mean."

"I see," said Cheviot. "Was that annuity all she had? No capital?"

"Only about £200, I think."

"Then nobody gains financially by her death?"

"Oh no, nobody at all."

"And you yourself will be put into an uncomfortable position?"

"Oh. Yes, I suppose I shall. Dear me. I hadn't thought about that."

Yet, Cheviot reflected, this implied that if she was the murderer her motive must be a particularly strong one, to be worth the loss to herself, or else she must be extremely short-sighted about her own affairs—a characteristic which did not usually apply to poisoners.

With the idea of feeling his way, he said, "Tell me what kind of woman Miss Marks was. I know you liked her. Did other people, generally? At the school, for instance?"

"I'm afraid she wasn't as popular as she ought to have been. I mean the girls loved her, but the mistresses didn't try to understand her, they only thought she was being unpleasant when she made her jokes. If

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you know what mistresses are like in a school such as St. Ruth's—they take themselves so very seriously."

"So, among the staff, there was really only you on her side?"

"I did the little I could, to help. We were such *very* great friends."

"But you only met, as a rule, in term time?"

"Oh no. For years and years we spent all our holidays together as well."

"Really?" said Cheviot. "That's a pretty severe test of friendship. Just you two alone?"

"We never wanted anyone else, we were so happy together."

It seemed an idyllic picture—if true, of course. Cheviot said, "I should have thought you would have got on one another's nerves. I understand school-mistresses are always a bit edgy by the end of term, and two of them cooped up alone all the holidays—Didn't you snap at each other a bit?"

"Oh *no*." Mary Lane seemed quite horrified. Then, as if she thought some further explanation was required, she said, "Of course, for some years after that dreadful accident, my nephew used to spend his school holidays with us."

"Oh, not quite alone, then," said Cheviot. "Still, even with a schoolboy around, I should have thought there'd have been a bit of occasional friction."

"Not between darling Harriet and me."

It was a statement which could have been taken in two ways, so Cheviot pounced on the more obscure one.

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“You mean that Miss Marks didn’t get on so very well with your nephew?”

“Oh no, I didn’t mean that at all. There was never any trouble then.”

Cheviot pounced again. “Only later, you mean?”

Miss Lane looked very much distressed. “Oh, I didn’t mean anything of the sort, I didn’t mean to say anything—Well, later there was a little difficulty. When Brian grew up. You see, darling Harriet was so very good with girls, but she didn’t really understand boys.”

“They take a bit of understanding,” remarked Cheviot. “I’ve been one, and I know. Particularly when they are just ceasing to be schoolboys and nobody quite realises it except themselves. So there was trouble between Miss Marks and Brian. Of course you took your nephew’s side?”

“Only very gently. There was never anything you could really call trouble.”

“Still,” suggested Cheviot, “such as it was, it has gone on, I suppose, right up to the present time?”

“Oh no. Harriet hasn’t seen Brian for years, now.”

“Why not? Isn’t he around?”

Miss Lane became noticeably pink with embarrassment, so that Cheviot wondered whether Brian Lane—of whom Kathleen had reported Miss Marks as saying “I don’t trust him”—was the skeleton in the family cupboard, the family black sheep, and all the rest of it.

Apparently with an effort, Miss Lane said, “As they

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—didn't get on very well, Brian stopped—coming here. He had to, really. I go and see him."

"I see," said Cheviot. "Well, that is quite a noticeable spanner in the works, isn't it? The depth of your friendliness with Miss Marks can't have been quite the same after that."

"Oh, it didn't make *any* difference," she cried. "We just agreed to arrange that little point in that way, and then—then we loved each other even more."

"I see," said Cheviot again. He wondered how far that statement of hers was true. A little thing like that could easily disrupt a great friendship. The question was what would have to be added to it to produce a motive for murder.

It appeared that this idyllic friendship had its unsmooth places, and even its secrets. Cheviot dug into his memory of what Kathleen had told him about the two women, and said, "Wasn't there something about Miss Marks having committed some terrible crime? Now, what was that?"

Miss Lane gave a little gasp, and said, "Oh, you shouldn't have heard about that. I suppose Miss Benson mentioned it to you. Such a pity, after my telling her it wasn't of any importance at all."

"Just a joke, was it?"

"Yes, of course," said Mary. "Darling Harriet was so very humorous, always making things sound as if she meant them when she didn't."

"Tell me about it," said Cheviot. Though his tone was pleasant enough, he made it sound like an order—

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for he was still uncertain whether Miss Lane's little catches of breath, and her flushes, were nervous habits or full of meaning.

"Oh," she said now. "Well, it was only a little thing that happened years ago, and really not worth repeating. Harriet had to speak for somebody—well, a sort of reference, really—and naturally when you do that you want to do the best you can to help someone, and Harriet made it—well, rather better than perhaps it should have been. And I was teasing her about that, because perhaps it *was* a little misleading, and she said—I remember so well, just as if it was yesterday—she said, 'Oh, Mary, do you mean I have committed a crime? It's not perjury or false pretences, is it?' And always after that she referred to it as her 'crime,' just as if it was something terrible. It—it was just the way she always joked about things."

"I see," said Cheviot.

"Of course," Mary went on, "it is quite all right between ourselves—with me, I mean—but Miss Benson was practically a stranger, and I didn't want her to take it the wrong way. Like the mistresses at St. Ruth's would have done, for instance, being quite serious and starting a rumour that darling Harriet really had committed a crime. So of course I had to assure her——"

"Yes, I see," said Cheviot.

It did not seem possible that that could be dovetailed into the story anywhere, except that talking about it had apparently been another small—very small—matter of disagreement between Miss Marks and Miss

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Lane. In fact, there seemed a considerable divergence of character between them, even if they had managed to hit things off in spite of that.

You didn't murder your best friend because her character differed from your own, though; so there must—if this theory was to be maintained—be something quite different, and much more definite, by way of motive.

Leaving that for the moment, he said, "You didn't really take any of that drink on Tuesday night, did you, when Miss Marks and Miss Benson were made so ill? As you remained quite well, I am assuming that you only pretended to drink."

She almost stammered in her excitement. "Oh, no, no," she cried, "I most definitely drank a little when Harriet proposed a toast. At least, it wasn't a toast, really, but she said "Here's to happy marriages," and of course I responded to that, thinking of that nice Miss Benson. I know Harriet suggested afterwards that I hadn't, but I had and I was ill afterwards, though not very badly and anyway I hadn't time to think about it." Then she took a breath and said, "You see, I wouldn't at all like you to think that darling Harriet was ill without me being ill too, even if I wasn't so bad as she was."

"Really?" said Cheviot. "Personally, I'm hard-hearted. I don't mind who gets ill provided I keep well myself. Still, that's beside the point. What I am getting at is that I've an idea that something was deliberately put into the gin on Tuesday in order to give people a

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distaste for it. Do you think that a reasonable idea?"

She said, "But—but the bottle of gin was sent to an analyst, and he said it was quite all right."

Cheviot said, "But was it?"

"What do you mean?"

Cheviot said, "Well, I just wondered. Two bottles of gin look exactly alike. If the one that went to the analyst wasn't the one from which your drinks were taken on Tuesday night, that would account for a lot. It was you who gave the bottle to Miss Benson, wasn't it?"

She said, "Yes. Yes, I did that."

Once upon a time, he would have tried the effect of definite accusations at this point, particularly in dealing with a woman suspect: but recently—though he had not himself yet recognised the change—he had begun to deal a trifle more gently with his suspects, particularly the women among them.

So, instead of thundering, he merely said, "Then have you anything to tell me about that?"

"Oh, no, no," she cried. "I—I am absolutely sure it was the same bottle."

"Really? How can you be so sure?"

She stared at him, and hesitated. Then she said, "I meant that it looked exactly the same, and it was in the usual position on the table, and—and we never have more than one bottle of gin out at a time."

"Oh, I see," said Cheviot. "Just that kind of sureness. It wouldn't have been that you hoped I would accept your assertion and leave it at that?"

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She said she did not know what he meant.

“What I mean by all this line of questioning, Miss Lane,” he said, “is that I think someone deliberately doctored the gin on Tuesday, arranged for a harmless bottle to be analysed on Wednesday, and afterwards added the poison which killed Miss Marks on Friday: and which killed Miss Marks alone, then, because the memory of what had happened on Tuesday prevented Miss Benson—well, anyone else, let me say—from drinking on Friday. That, as I see it, is the story of this murder. What is more, I believe the same person was responsible for the sending of Mrs. Arnsworth’s letter to her husband, naming George Gray—with the certainty that Arnsworth would at once come down and tell Miss Marks about it, and that under that shock Miss Marks would break her resolution and drink gin—the gin that had by that time been poisoned.”

Mary said, “Oh—— Oh, it is horrible.”

“I agree,” said Cheviot. “A diabolical scheme. But all the same—— Now, you come into that story at more than one point. You have admitted that it was you who took the gin bottle on Wednesday morning and gave it to Miss Benson. Besides that, I have evidence that you knew of Mrs. Arnsworth’s letter, and in fact advised—possibly urged—the sending of it. Do you admit that too?”

“She did consult me about it,” answered Mary.

“Yes,” said Cheviot. “Now, I told you a few minutes ago that Mr. Gray was mentioned in that letter. I don’t think you knew that before. Yet the news did not shock

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you or even surprise you. Am I to gather that, even if you didn't know that, you suspected it, and that that is why it failed to surprise you?"

"Oh dear," she cried. "You do find out everything so. I—I was terribly afraid that there was something going on between Stella and George—one or two little things I'd noticed—her going down to his flat, quite late in the evening, when her husband was away, and so on. But I wasn't certain, and I was most terribly anxious that darling Harriet shouldn't know—even that I suspected it—because it would have hurt her so horribly."

"And yet," said Cheviot, "you advised Mrs. Arnsworth to ask for a divorce and to give her husband all the details. You know that doesn't make sense, if you were really so considerate of Miss Marks."

"Oh dear," said Mary again. "But I didn't say anything about details. I was merely trying to help Stella as much as I could, and I didn't think it right that she should be tied to that awful man, if she could be happy with somebody else. I suppose it *was* very foolish of me—it is always so difficult when you want to help two people at once. I did wonder afterwards if I had done what I oughtn't to have done, because of darling Harriet, but I never dreamt that Stella would actually mention George—even if I was right about him. I only wanted her to make it quite clear that she wanted her freedom."

"I see," said Cheviot. "At any rate you did encourage Mrs. Arnsworth to do something which, as it turned out—whether that was your intention or not—

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caused Miss Marks to receive the shock which threw her back to drinking the gin. So that is another point where you fit into my theory of how this murder was committed. I find that extremely interesting. Have you anything to say to me about the rest of what happened?"

"No," she cried. "Oh no, no. I don't know anything at all about it."

## CHAPTER THREE

### I MEET THE SUSPECTS

#### I

I THINK I have made it clear in the course of my narrative that, for me, being desperately in love with Cheviot was one thing, and being convinced that Inspector Burmann, C.I.D., was all-wise and therefore invariably right in his judgments was quite another thing. He couldn't know it, poor boy—not having known me long enough—but I am constitutionally incapable of believing *anybody* “always right.” Why, I don't even know that I am *always* right, myself!

Cheviot, on the other hand, is sure he is right all the time and every time. Thus, you see, there were one or two little obstacles for us to get over, as a prelude to marriage.

#### II

We started on one of them when he came into the dining-room, looking extremely pleased with himself, and said, “Mind if we go into your room? The constable has to type out his notes in here, and I want to tell you how things are going.”

After the preliminaries, I sat on the edge of my bed and he stood by the window.

“I have only the vaguest theory as yet,” he began, “as to why Harriet Marks was murdered. But now at

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least I do know who killed her. It was her good friend, Mary Lane."

"Oh, Cheviot, how utterly ridiculous," I cried.

He tried a slight dash of masculine superiority.

"I know, I know," he said. "She talks of 'darling Harriet', and therefore she must have been fond of her, devoted to her. But it wouldn't have been very difficult to put that on, would it? I quite see that a few sentimental expressions would deceive you, my dear, but——"

"I'm not talking of that," I said, "but I've seen them together. It was obvious, in every expression, every gesture, that they were devoted to each other. It wasn't just a case of banal terms of endearment, there was very deep affection underneath that."

"I am not questioning that they were once good friends," Cheviot insisted, "but some situation has arisen which overrides that. There could be circumstances—in fact there often are—in which it is vitally urgent to ensure the immediate death of someone you love. This is one of those cases. I don't yet know what the circumstances were—I told you I didn't know the motive—but I do know that Mary Lane murdered Harriet Marks. You talk of 'every expression and every gesture': well, every expression and every gesture, now, has guilt written on it—guilt and fear."

"Oh, I see," said I, turning a bit sarcastic. "It's just a kind of thought-reading that you've been doing. Nothing to do with evidence or anything of that sort. You are quite certain that poor Mary is guilty—and I sup

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pose your idea is to have her hanged on the strength of that—because you think she is afraid of you.”

Just for a second, he looked really angry. Then he remembered it was me, and looked kind instead. Only just at that moment I didn’t want kindness, I wanted commonsense.

“She wouldn’t have any cause to be afraid of me if she wasn’t guilty,” he said. “If she were just the kindly, silly, sentimental old dear that she makes herself out to be when she isn’t being tied in knots by my official questioning——”

He stopped then, because even he could see from my face that that wasn’t getting him anywhere. So he tried another line.

“You must remember,” he said, “that I have had many years’ experience of this kind of thing. I know what I am talking about. I can judge far better than you what is meant by facial expressions, and hesitations, and sudden flushes, and little contradictions—even by people saying exactly what I expect them to say when I know their guilt is making them say it. To a layman—to you, my dear—that may sound nonsense. But it is just the essence of the science of detection, and that is a thing I know a great deal about.”

“Oh, Cheviot,” I said, crossly, “for Heaven’s sake don’t try to talk like the ‘Great I Am.’ It doesn’t suit you.”

“I’m sorry, my dear,” he said, keeping his temper better than I was doing. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have told you before I had the complete proofs. I merely thought

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you'd—you might be interested. Now, don't you think any more about it. I'd hate to have you bothered. And of course you've had a very trying time lately. I—I'm terribly sorry to have said anything to distress you."

It was nice of him, I'm sure—now. But at the time it didn't seem so much different from the way Sergeant Kimber had talked to me when he was "condescending." So it only made me more furious. I said—I am afraid I did!—that it was all very well for him, because he was barely human, and it didn't matter to him in the least if Mary was hanged for a murder she hadn't committed. But that kind of thing did matter to me, because I saw people as people and not merely as "Suspect No. 1" and "Suspect No. 2" etc., etc.

He looked at me very compassionately, and only just refrained—I could see it—from saying he would ask the doctor to give me a sedative.

So I became more furious still, and we had our first row.

Or, to be more exact, I had it: for Cheviot remained infuriatingly calm. He talked to me in the tone which people use to petulant children, with careful explanations in words of one syllable.

"I told you I had only a vague idea of why Mary Lane killed Harriet Marks," he said, "but I have that much, and if I am right—if I can get it proved—even you will see that it makes sense. You didn't know, did you, that the two women once taught in the same school? Miss Lane told me all about that—well, not all, but enough to set my imagination working."

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I said, "Oh yes? So you admit that it is all imagination?" But he ignored that.

"Miss Lane says she wasn't any good at teaching but that Miss Marks was brilliant. Miss Marks took the top form in classics, while Miss Lane took the infants in the 'Three R's.' Miss Marks was popular with the girls, whereas Miss Lane was a self-confessed failure. Nevertheless, Miss Marks befriended Miss Lane—one can see the condescension in that. Just think of it. There was little Miss Lane, having a miserable, chivvied time with her infants, and Miss Marks getting on famously with the captain of the school and all the prefects; and Miss Marks condescending at times to give helpful advice to a woman who was older than herself but frightfully incompetent. There is nothing, you know, that hurts so much as having people be kind to you.

"Then Miss Marks came into a legacy and decided to retire. Being a good-hearted person, she wanted to do some good with her new money, so she decided to dig the helpless Miss Lane out of her misery and take her into retirement too. Besides, good nature apart, Miss Lane could be very useful to her. So she——"

I said, "How do you know what Harriet wanted and thought?"

He smiled at me and said, "This is the imagination. I am not asking you to believe it till I have proved it. Miss Marks suggested that they should live together, and when Miss Lane had qualms about living on her friend's money, Miss Marks said she could earn her keep by being housekeeper. Of course, Miss Lane

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didn't see it beforehand, but in effect that made Miss Marks the mistress and Miss Lane the mere slavey. So the old, humiliating state of things was perpetuated, and—”

He broke off and looked at me with the smile.

“Can you stand a bit more of what I admit is only sheer imagination—at present?” he asked. “You see, I want you to get the hang of things, to understand the relationship of these two women and how much Miss Lane would have been hurt by it. You know, at a school, there is always a party and a presentation when a popular mistress retires. So there would have been a whip-round, and then something horribly resplendent would have been given to Miss Marks as a parting gift from the girls. The school captain would have made a speech, saying how they had all loved Miss Marks and what a wonderful help her influence was going to be on them in their careers. You know the kind of thing. All very fulsome and a bit sentimental. All the little kids in tears. And then the second prefect would have nudged the school captain and whispered to her, and the school captain—who would just have got to the point of saying, ‘So we all wish Miss Marks the very best of luck, and I now call on you to give three very hearty cheers for Miss Marks’—would have added, ‘Oh, and for Miss Lane, of course.’

“Well, you see the idea. Miss Lane ‘also ran.’ And now, having got away from the hated school, things weren't going to be any better. Miss Marks would be the woman of means, owning everything, running

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everything, and being condescendingly friendly, and Miss Lane would live on her friend's money and do the washing-up. So it would be 'darling Harriet' because that was part of the bargain and you have to keep in with your bread and butter, but underneath there would be bitter resentment. And that has gone on for three years. Think of the psychological tangle anyone would get into after three years of bitter humiliation."

I had to admit—to myself, anyway—that I hadn't known Cheviot had it in him. I had been at more than one of those school presentations—first as one of the "little kids in tears" and later as the school captain—and I could see it all.

And, as far as that went, although it still was only imagination and not evidence, it did sound remarkably true—likely, anyhow.

In any case, it made me want to be friends again with Cheviot, and also gave me an excuse for getting there without giving up my point or apologising, so I said nice things to him about it. I also said (not quite apologising) some nasty things about myself and my temper, and he was very sweet about that.

Then I said, "All the same——" and he said, "Don't," and I said that if Mary's life depended on it, I had to. So there we were again, more or less.

What I had to say, this time, was that it would be one thing to feel bitter and humiliated, and another thing altogether to commit murder because of it, and anyway if you'd stood it for years and years you could go on indefinitely.

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Cheviot said, "Oh yes. The bitterness would be only the background. There'll be some more acute cause of disagreement which has come to a head recently. There has been some bickering between them, I gather, about the nephew, Brian Lane, whom Miss Lane adored and Miss Marks disliked and distrusted. It may have had something to do with that, or perhaps there was another reason. But whatever it is, I shall find it. I'm going off to Bedlington, where that school is, to trace things."

He went on from there, before I had had time to face the idea of his going away again, to say that I really must go now and stay in an hotel. That, he said, would be more cheerful for me, and more comfortable, and anyhow he couldn't possibly leave me unprotected.

If he had had any experience of women, I'm sure he would not have chosen that moment; and if he had had more experience of me he would have done it quite differently. Probably I did need the sedative, and certainly I was in the mood to resent being protected—or rather, to resent having my protection talked about. So I dug my heels in, and said that whatever he did or was going to do—and all the more if he was going to do the dreadful things he talked about—I was going to stay in the flat and help Mary.

I am sadly afraid that I am a fool, with my independence and obstinacy, and my habit of obeying impulses. I did want to help Mary, and I did think Cheviot was making a terrible mistake about her; but under all that I only wanted one thing, and that was to

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love Cheviot and to be loved by him, and not to have all these abominable problems coming between us. As Mary Lane would have put it, I wanted to be a rosebud just opening out, and I wanted the course of true love to run quite smoothly; and instead of that, here was I quarrelling with Cheviot and making everything as difficult as I could for him. Oh, what a fool I was!

In the end—or rather when we reached the moment when he had only just time to rush for the Bedlington train—Cheviot reluctantly agreed to my staying in the flat, but said he would have to leave Sergeant Kimber: he nearly said to look after me, but my eyes stopped him and he said “to be in charge of things here,” instead.

### III

Within ten minutes of Cheviot’s departure, I had decided that I hated scenes with Cheviot and there must never be another one; and that the only good thing about it all was that Cheviot hadn’t listened to me and had insisted on protecting me. Inside myself, I was quite terribly pleased about that: people like me who are proud of being very independent always long to be dependent on someone.

So there I was, alone and all ready to be protected. It would have been much nicer if Cheviot had stayed to do it himself, but as he had had to go, Sergeant Kimber would have to do as his deputy. Only unfortunately Sergeant Kimber had received private instructions from Cheviot which had reduced him to a

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pitable state of embarrassment. I joined him in the sitting-room and stood waiting to be protected, and all he did was to look at me and turn a delicate shade of pink.

I think he must have known he was turning pink, because the next thing that happened was that he became gruff and exceedingly official.

"I'll not be troubling you at all, Miss," he said. "Just staying here in case I'm wanted. You carry on with anything you want to do, and I won't get in your way."

"You'll be very bored," I said.

"Can't help that, Miss. Inspector's orders."

The first afternoon proved that the system was not going to work at all well. Whenever I went from one room to another, Sergeant Kimber was always there, being unobtrusive.

After a couple of hours it got on my nerves.

"Look here," I said, "if we've got to have this arrangement, for heaven's sake let's be matey about it. Come and sit down and talk to me."

"Couldn't do that, Miss," he said. "Inspector said I was to be here but not bother you."

"You're bothering me a lot," I retorted. "Besides, what do you propose to do at night? Are you going to stay awake, on the mat outside my bedroom door?"

Sergeant Kimber turned pink again, so I gathered that that had been troubling him.

"The Inspector didn't precisely say about that," he told me. "Not to let you out of my sight, was his orders, but—"

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"Oh, I don't think we'll take that quite literally," I said. "You need only be within call."

"Yes, Miss. Only I sleep like a hog, as a matter of fact, and there's no waking me. When I'm in bed, that is. So I thought perhaps if I had a chair in the hall——"

"Nonsense," I retorted. "You'll have to have a relief. If that wasn't in the orders, you can fix it yourself."

Sergeant Kimber said the Inspector wouldn't like that, having made him responsible.

So I said, "Have Constable Tonks here, and then you and he can do turn and turn about, with you keeping the responsibility. Then if Miss Lane comes for me with the carving knife, there'll be two of you to handle her. I'm sure the Inspector would approve of that."

Of course, I was not sure that Cheviot did altogether approve of Mr. Tonks, but that was only silly of him: and he—Mr. Tonks, I mean—had the great advantage that he would neither be official nor turn pink, and he could provide some entertainment for me while I was being protected.

Fortunately, this idea appealed to Sergeant Kimber. I am not quite sure, but I rather fancy that the thing he liked most about it was that Mr. Tonks would be a chaperon for him.

#### IV

William Tonks improved on acquaintance. He was still jittery and inclined to look around, even in critical moments at chess, as if he expected to see Harriet's body

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lying on the floor, and at first he was a bit resentful at having been brought back to the scene of horrors. But when I drew him out, he was quite an alive person. He told me it had always been his ambition to be a policeman—"not just on the beat, of course, but something pretty high up, a superintendent at the least"—and that now things were beginning to move in the right direction, he meant to go on and on. But the great thing was to keep on the right side of "the old man."

"You know, Miss Benson," he said, "I nearly smudged the copy-book over playing chess with you yesterday—got a frightfully dirty look from him. I'll have to be more careful. If you don't mind my saying so, he's a regular tartar in the Force, and there'll be no silver lace for me if he puts in one of his stinking reports on me. I can't risk that. I've got to get on, and nothing is going to stop me, ever. So though I suppose it is all right to be with you now, seeing that he can't possibly get back tonight, I'll have to watch my step tomorrow. There's that damned old sneak, Kimber, to think about, too: he'd do anybody down, to perk his own stock up a bit. But I've got something on him, and I could do a bit of blackmail—'you keep mum about me, and I'll keep mum about you,' you know—if it comes to that. But the Inspector is another matter. He's a Holy Horror and never gives anyone a second chance. So he has to be watched."

It seemed to me, from all this, that I might have to be careful too. I mean, being married to a Holy Horror who had to be watched, would be quite a thing. I wondered

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whether new wives were given a second chance, when they burnt the dinner.

I wondered whether, in the course of years, I should become like Sergeant Kimber and say "Not what the Inspector ordered," when a girl-friend asked me to go to the pictures.

### v

At ten o'clock, just as I was thinking of going to bed before Sergeant Kimber awoke from his day-time sleep and returned to officialdom and night-duty, Mary Lane came into the sitting-room. She had remained in her own room all day, having more or less taken to her bed from shock and misery, poor thing. I thought she looked terribly ill. I did not know what she had come for, but it seemed that she wanted to be alone, for when she saw Mr. Tonks and me she quickly went away again: a sad figure, and I thought again how terribly wrong it was that Cheviot should be thinking of her as a murderer.

That threw me into gloom. Having got into my mind that picture of Cheviot as his subordinates saw him, I felt that nothing would ever stop him, and that if he wanted to hang Mary Lane, he would hang her. (I was, of course, being shamefully unjust to the poor man, because he isn't like that at all: as I now know, all he ever wants to do is to follow a logical argument, and if it happens to lead to a hanging, he is sorry but it can't be helped. But I didn't see that at the time—and I was terrified about poor Mary.) So I suddenly felt that I

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would do *anything* to make things so that Mary couldn't be hanged.

Only I didn't know what I could do.

I had got as far as that when Mr. Tonks caught my eye and said, "You don't believe her guilty, do you, Miss Benson?"

"No," I said. "I don't. I can't. Not for a minute." Then, impulsively, I added, "Do you?"

"Oh, it's more than my job's worth to have an opinion, when the Inspector has made up his mind," he answered. "But, if this is strictly round the gatepost and not on any account to be quoted, I don't. I should say she isn't capable of it, for one thing. But for all that, the Inspector apparently means to hang her, so she'll be hanged."

He was silent then, and I was silent too. Then he said, with a little hesitation, "What is worrying me—and this also is very strictly off the record, you know—is that as far as I can see the Inspector is heading for a ghastly bloomer just because he isn't up to his best form, just now. I've seen him in action lots of times, and he is usually pretty brilliant. But this time, as much as not he isn't concentrating on his case. It is perfectly obvious that he has something else on his mind." Again he hesitated for a second, and then he said, "I'm terribly sorry, Miss Benson, but it is you he has on his mind. You've realised that, haven't you?"

It took my breath away, said like that, even if, possibly, I had been half-thinking it for some time. After a minute, I said, with an uncontrollable catch in my

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voice, "You mean—you mean it is because he is thinking so much about me that—that Mary Lane will be hanged?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "I wouldn't like to say that—it sounds so cruel to you. But I think it is a pity somebody can't look into the case with an undivided mind."

### VI

I slept very little that night. Hour after hour, till the morning, I heard Sergeant Kimber tramping past my bedroom door and stopping every so often, presumably to listen for the sounds of my breathing. But it wasn't Sergeant Kimber and his noises that made me sleepless.

Cheviot had said all along that I ought not to be there, distracting him from his work. I had laughed at him for it, I had quarrelled with him, I had teased him, I had kissed him—I had done all the things that would most draw his attention away from his case. How could he be expected to concentrate, to use the powers which Mr. Tonks had described as "pretty brilliant," when he had to maintain a spasmodic quarrel and a constant love-affair, all at the same time?

And as the result of those distractions which I had so thoughtlessly—and at the same time, so very obstinately—insisted on, he had got the idea of his case altogether wrong: and Mary Lane was going to be hanged.

Of course I knew that I should have to be meekly

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settled in the hotel by the time he returned to work in the flat.

But the trouble was that that would be too late. The mischief was already done—thanks to me—and my going away now would not alter things. Indeed, it might even make everything worse. Cheviot had got this wrong idea about Mary into his mind: and in his way he was quite as obstinate as I was. He abandoned his ideas when they were proved to be wrong—proved wrong, that is, in such a way that he had no choice but to accept the proof; and then he went racing off after another idea. But till he had that kind of proof, he was like a limpet. And, as I saw it, if I went away and left him to carry on alone with an undisturbed mind at last, it would now be Mary Lane that he carried on against. So everything would become still worse, instead of better.

In fact, nothing was going to stop him now unless his theory about Mary was disproved. Or, at the very least, unless something new transpired to make someone else's guilt look equally likely.

### vii

I do not know at what hour in the night I remembered that Cheviot's case against Mary chiefly depended on the fact that he had frightened her.

From that, I went on to wonder what the position would have been if he had not frightened her. Wouldn't she have said something quite different then, something that might have helped towards finding the real mur-

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derer and would not have aroused the slightest suspicion against herself? No doubt Cheviot had thrown in all his paraphernalia of officialdom and horror at the interview, with Mr. Tonks taking notes and the handcuffs practically being jangled! Supposing, instead, there had been just the quiet, friendly talk that there could have been between Mary and *me*? Wouldn't the result have been altogether different?

So my idea was born. At about four in the morning, I think, I decided that I would have that quiet talk with Mary and see if I could learn something from her which Cheviot had missed.

I had only a small twinge of conscience about it, and I pressed that down very quickly. After all, Mary Lane was a friend of mine, and I had every right to talk to her. I had even said to Cheviot that I was going to give her "help and consolation." And there wasn't anything disloyal in doing this—I was only trying to save Cheviot from a mistake, to set right something which had resulted from a mistake of my own. . . . I'd be helping him, really.

### VIII

Directly after breakfast, therefore, I went to see Mary in her bedroom. She was not up—she did not look as if she had the strength to get up. I doubt if she had slept much more than I had, and her face looked white and drawn, and very, very sad.

I sat down beside her bed and took her hand.

"You are having a very bad time, aren't you?" I said.

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The sympathy made her weep a little. "I—I still can't believe it," she said. "That I shall never see darling Harriet again. It isn't possible, it isn't possible."

"I think you ought to go away from here for a bit," I suggested. "It won't be good for you to stay on here after that terrible shock."

She looked at me in silence for a minute, and then said, "Do you think I should be allowed to? Oh, Miss Benson, it is all so very terrible, that on top of everything else. I know he is your fiancé, and I am sure he must be very nice to you, and of course he is only doing his duty and it can't be at all nice to be a policeman—But he terrifies me. He asks such extraordinary questions, and he is so very, very sharp, and he makes me say things I didn't want to say. And then I think he draws conclusions in his mind——I'm almost certain he wondered if I had killed darling Harriet. I know you'll say that nobody could think that—at least, I suppose you will, I hope you will—but if he didn't mean that, I don't know what he can have meant."

I said, "I think it is his job not to rule out anybody as impossible. He seems to start with a list of people who had what he calls 'opportunity' and—and to think about them all."

I wanted to get away from that subject as quickly as possible, so I went on, "You must have some ideas yourself, even if Cheviot didn't encourage you to express them. Do you think it was Mr. Arnsworth?"

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"Oh dear," she said. "I've never liked him, and Harriet didn't either; and of course we did talk to Stella——"

"Cheviot thinks that wouldn't be enough as a motive for—as a motive," I explained. "You can't think of anything else?"

"It is so difficult to think at all, now," she answered.

"Suppose I help you," I suggested. "Just chat to me about Mr. Arnsworth and your memories of him. For instance, how did you and Harriet first meet him? I suppose that was after he came to live in the flat, upstairs?"

"Oh no," she said, "we knew him before that. As soon as he became engaged to Stella."

"Then you knew Stella still earlier?"

For a second there appeared almost a smile on her lips. "Ever since she wore pig-tails," she explained. "I knew her even before she grew any pig-tails, when she was a rather unruly child in the Lower Third at St. Ruth's. I didn't like her much—but then I never liked any of them because they were always up to things the moment my back was turned. But I didn't have her for very long, and after that I only saw her without having much to do with her. I remember I used to be rather troubled about the way she developed—so very—so very—I thought she'd be a little devil when she grew up. But by the time she got into the Sixth, she was a little more serious, and darling Harriet used to say that something could be made of her if she was handled the

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right way. So when she left—to go into the Wrens, because the war was still on—darling Harriet kept in touch with her. I think she did modelling after the war—most unsuitable, but of course she has a lovely figure. Then, about two years ago, she told Harriet she was getting married, and it seemed a very good thing—settling down, I mean, after that sort of life—and as the top flat here became vacant just then, we wrote to the landlords. That was when we first met Mr. Arnsworth, just before her marriage."

I said, "That letter to the landlords wouldn't have given Mr. Arnsworth any complaint against Harriet, I suppose? I don't see how it could have done, seeing it got him somewhere to live, but it is that kind of thing I'm looking for."

"Oh no," she cried. "He was *most* grateful. In fact, at that time we were all four very friendly. It was only later, when we realised that he wasn't treating Stella very properly, that we felt we had to stop inviting him."

"Oh," I said. "You stopped inviting him to the flat? Do you mean while you continued to have Stella here?"

"Oh yes, she was always welcome."

"So he would certainly have had a grievance against you both. But I can't imagine that that alone would have been enough— By the bye, if he was never invited, isn't it rather odd that he came down on Tuesday night? He may have had some sort of excuse on Thursday, after getting Stella's letter, if he urgently

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wanted to talk to someone about it, but on Tuesday, he didn't appear to have come for any purpose at all. He hadn't even anything to say."

"I was very much surprised," she said.

#### IX

Mary was looking extremely tired by that time, so I thought I ought to leave her.

I had certainly got one point that Cheviot had missed in the fact that Arnsworth had had no ostensible reason for coming to the flat on Tuesday. It wasn't very much. It wasn't enough to make Cheviot excited and send him chasing Arnsworth in place of Mary. But it was something. A beginning. If only I had a little more?

I sat down and thought about that visit of Tuesday, and almost at once I realised something else.

If Arnsworth's otherwise unexplainable appearance that day was for the purpose of doctoring the gin, so that Mary and I should have a distaste for it, two things were essential to the plan: that he should be left alone for a moment in the room where the gin was, and that the gin-drinking should not start till after he had gone.

I wanted to be quite certain about the second of those points, because I thought it might lead me somewhere. Obviously, if illness was going to result, he would not want to be let in for that himself. He could, of course, quite safely have taken part in drinking before he added the what-was-it—but if he knew Harriet's habits (as he did) he would have foreseen that that

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might leave an empty bottle, and so rob him of his chance.

Yes, that was it. He had delayed the gin-drinking by refusing it himself. Thus his announcement that he had given up drink would have been an essential part of his scheme. I had suspected at the time that it wasn't true. If I could now *prove* that it wasn't true——

#### x

I was now going further than I had originally intended. There was a lot of difference between having a quiet chat with Mary and deliberately seeking a talk with Mr. Arnsworth and trying to play a trick on him. I could not justify this to that conscience of mine. But it is never a very active conscience, and I am impulsive. So I didn't bother much about that. I just told myself that the end would justify the means, and I should be able to persuade Cheviot of that if things worked out all right. I refused to let myself think of what the position would be if they didn't.

I sat down and wrote a little note to Mr. Arnsworth. I told him "the Inspector" had gone, Miss Lane wasn't well and was keeping to her bed, and I was feeling dismal. I wondered therefore, whether he would care to drop in about noon for a chat because I couldn't stand being alone. I'd be so grateful if he would.

It was, intentionally, a bit what-used-to-be-called "forward," seeing that I had only met him twice before and was engaged to someone else. But you can't catch fish without bait, and there is no point in being rather

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pretty if you aren't prepared to use that as bait for a man—in a good cause.

I dropped the note through Mr. Arnsworth's letter-box, and at half-past eleven I slipped round to the off-licence and bought a bottle of whisky. (I couldn't bring myself to buy gin).

Then I broke the news to Mr. Tonks. He said, "That's all very fine, Miss Benson, and I wish you luck. But for the love of Mike don't drag me into it in any way. If you do—or if it comes out that I knew what you were doing and didn't rouse old Kimber—I'll be out on my ear in a matter of days, and there's the end to my career."

"I don't want you anywhere around," I answered. "You had better hide yourself in the kitchen. Only, your job is to protect me, and as I am going to spend an hour alone with the murderer, more or less accusing him, I think you ought to be within call. After all, if you rush in valiantly and save me from death at the hands of a mad murderer, my fiancé will be frightfully pleased with you, and you'll probably be promoted on the spot."

### XI

I was very much scared as twelve o'clock drew near. Clearly, Mr. Arnsworth had moods—or histrionic poses—and I couldn't tell what I'd get this time. If he came, I mean. He might be raving, or furious, or—or anything. And if I wasn't supremely careful about how I put things—

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He came. Directly I opened the door to him, I knew that the bait had been taken and the hook was in. He was all dolled up and out to kill.

He said, "Ah, charming, charming," the moment he saw me, and then, with courtly grace—or it may have been some memory of the time when he played Beau Brummel, if he did—he kissed my hand. So naturally I said, "So nice of you to come," and tried to look as if hand-kissing put me in a flutter.

Actually, I was in a flutter, but not that kind. To get it over, as soon as he was seated, I said, "I'm afraid there's only whisky. Do you mind?" and then I had to turn away so that he should not see my hand shaking as I picked up the glass.

However, he said, "That suits me," quite coolly; and then my hand shook still more violently, because I knew I really was having a cosy *tête-a-tête* with a murderer.

I said, "I'm so glad. I nearly got you ginger ale, because I remembered that last Tuesday you were on the wagon. But I hoped that by this time your good resolutions would have failed."

"Ah, last Tuesday. Yes, I was in a very bad way then. Indeed, Miss Benson, I am afraid I behaved shockingly. If I may prostrate myself with apologies——"

"There's not the slightest need," I said. "I could see you were under a strain. You were all tensed up, as if—as if you had to be here, but wished you were anywhere else."

"That's exactly it," he answered. "I hated every minute of being here."

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For a moment, I forgot my part and said, "That's not very complimentary." It was a pity I did, because it threw him straight back on to the pose.

"Dear lady," he said, "I was blind. I grovel, gladly, because I was blind. I had come because even the society of a frost-bitten old crow and a fluffy puss-cat was better than that of myself alone. Having made up my mind to endure that, as the lesser of two evils, I found what to me, at that moment, was even worse—a stranger. It was sympathy I wanted, and how could I expect that from a stranger? So in my misery I was blind, and did not even see that the stranger was a beautiful stranger."

Then he seemed to think that not enough, for he went on, "And may I not add, a *wonderfully* beautiful stranger?"

It is awfully difficult to take part in that kind of conversation when you are not used to it. Particularly if what you want to be talking about is something quite different. So I said, "I didn't feel you wanted sympathy. And I don't see how you can have expected to get it from Miss Marks and Miss Lane, seeing that they——" I only just stopped in time. You cannot safely tell a man—even, or especially, a murderer—that the people he claimed to have wanted to confide in hated the sight of him. "As a matter of fact," I said, "I couldn't make out why you had called, but I felt you were here for some special purpose."

"I was. I should like to feel," he said—gallantly, I suppose—"that Fate sent me here."

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"Oh, I hardly think you can pass the buck to Fate, in that way," I retorted. "You know what you came for——"

"Ah yes," he said. "I came expecting to find the Beast, and I found Beauty."

I was getting a little tired of these posturings, the fact being that he did not do them well enough. Having made copy out of not having recognised my startling beauty, he could hardly claim to have found it, as a blessing bestowed on him by Heaven. I do like even poseurs ~~to~~ be consistent.

So I turned a bit nasty, and said, "Then you have written off your wife as a dead loss, and not such a great one at that?"

He said, "Miss Benson, I am a man of moods. One day I am in despair over the past, another day I see a ray of hope in the future. It is the artist's temperament. Hope, like the sight of Beauty, stirs the vitals of my soul. Under its influence, I can work miracles. If Hope could have but a whisper of encouragement . . ."

It would have been too crude, I felt, to mention Cheviot or wave my engagement ring at him. But I did want to stop this nonsense and get back to the much more vital point of him being a murderer. So I went right off at a tangent and said, "Wasn't it odd that Miss Marks was taken ill just after you left here on Tuesday?"

That at least shook him right out of posing.

"Odd?" he repeated. "In what way was it 'odd'?"

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I took fright then, and hedged. "Of course it was a coincidence," I said, "but coincidences always seem odd, don't they?"

"I really fail to see what was odd, or even a coincidence worth mentioning," he said, "in illness occurring at any particular time."

"Not if it only happened once," I said, getting back my courage and deciding—with a prayer that Mr. Tonks would still be at his post, within earshot—to go through with it, "but you were here on Tuesday, and Miss Marks was taken mysteriously ill the ~~same~~ evening. You were also here on Thursday, and again she was taken ill just afterwards—the next day, anyhow—so that she died."

He said, "Oh." Then he whistled. "So that's the trouble, is it?" he said. "That's why that inspector came to see me, and asked a lot of questions, and came damned near to levelling accusations at me. Poisoning, mild or fatal, always following visits from Norman Arnsworth! I'm beginning to understand one or two things."

He got up, very suddenly. "Thanks for telling me," he said. "I think I'll be getting along now—if you don't mind."

He went to the door--no hand-kissing now, and no theatricals. Then he turned.

"And there are also things I do not understand," he said. "Chiefly about you, Miss Benson. I thought we were having a pleasant *tête-a-tête*, but I'm beginning to wonder if I haven't been pumped. In fact, what I took

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to be a social invitation is looking uncommonly like a piece of plain trickery. Have you got a policeman hidden behind that door, with a note-book in his hand, taking down all I've said?"

Luckily, it was only a rhetorical question. He didn't look behind the kitchen door.

### XII

I went to Mr. Tonks for comfort. "I'm sure I've made a mess of things," I said. "It is perfectly clear that Mr. ~~Arnsworth~~ is guilty, and it is equally clear that I gave too much away."

"No need to bother about that," he said. "The suspects always know they are suspected, even when it is the Inspector who is getting at them. In fact, he always says it is a good thing, because it worries them. If you've got Arnsworth rattled, he is more likely to make a slip, the kind of slip that will give everything away. In fact, my advice to you--unofficially, of course, and still under the hat—is to keep on at him. Make him see that you are not letting the matter rest."

"But how," I began, and then I stopped abruptly because I heard Sergeant Kimber on the prowl, seeking his lunch. As we were in the kitchen, I grabbed a saucepan and said to Mr. Tonks, "Well, I hope you're not frightfully hungry, because there'll be nothing but scrambled eggs and cheese."

Kimber, looking tousled and definitely unofficial, put his head round the door and said, "Ah, you're there, Constable Tonks. Everything going quietly?"

## *Drink Alone and Die*

‘Nothing stirring at all, Sergeant,’ said Tonks.

### XIII

The three of us ate our meal together—after I had taken a tray in to Mary—in constrained silence, because Sergeant Kimber was the worst kind of snob and would have preferred separate messes. However that made him gobble his food and go quickly back to his bed, so Mr. Tonks and I were soon back at our secret conversation.

“What is wanted now,” I said, “is something definite on Arnsworth’s motive.”

“That, and letting him know you are looking for it,” said Tonks. “You’ve got a lot against him, now, Miss Benson. You just want to turn the screw a bit tighter, while he’s wondering how much he gave away. It will be lucky if he happens to look out of his front window when you go down to see his wife.”

Not having thought of that, I said, “Oh. Would that be the thing to do, do you think?”

“Sorry if I jumped you,” said Tonks. “I thought you meant that, when you talked about getting his motive. You couldn’t get it, could you, except by seeing his wife, because she knows more about him than anyone else. Whatever the motive is, it’s tied up with his life in the last two years—and probably it is something to do with her. So if you could get her to talk——That’s your whole idea, isn’t it? She’ll be careful with the Inspector—anybody would except the ones who get scared—but you could get her talking.”

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"Two girls together," I murmured, getting on to the idea.

At the same time, I knew I hadn't any bait for her. It was not in the least likely that she would accept an invitation to tea from me, and I could hardly forge one from Mary. And I didn't see that I could call without any excuse, and proceed to pump her.

Mr. Tonks had no bright ideas about that, so I had to think it out for myself. After half-an-hour I had a scheme. I ran down the basement steps, hatless and coatless ~~and~~ but of breath, and then I kept my finger on the bell and banged with the knocker at the same time.

The door was quickly opened, and I saw a woman who may have been beautiful, but who seemed to have got her ideas on make-up from the high-class tarts. But I hadn't time to criticise, because she said at once, "What on earth is the matter?" and I had to remember the part I was playing.

Keeping up the breathlessness, I said, "I'm Kathleen Benson, and I'm staying in the flat above. Poor Miss Lane is ill—I'm quite frightened about her—and as she once told me you were an old friend, I simply had to come to you for help."

Stella Arnsworth said, "You don't mean—not poison again?"

"Oh, no, no. It's her heart. After all she has been through over the tragedy, I suppose. She is in a sort of collapse, and terribly short of breath. Do you think sal volatile would be the best thing? Or brandy,

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perhaps? I haven't either, but I thought possibly you—— Oh, I'd be so grateful if you could lend me some."

"We've a little brandy," she said, and went away to fetch it.

I only hoped she wouldn't offer to come up with me. It would be too bad luck if she had done a first-aid course and fancied herself in that way. But fortunately all she said was, "If it's her heart, you had better have a doctor." So I said I had already rung up her doctor, but he was out on his rounds and they were trying to get in touch with him. Then I grabbed the brandy from her as if there wasn't a moment to be lost, and raced up the area steps.

#### XIV

I was pouring a good tot of the brandy down the kitchen sink (since it wouldn't have done for my breath to have smelt of it when I went back full of gratitude—and questions) when Mr. Tonks came to me.

"I thought I ought to be keeping an eye on you, Miss Benson," he said, "so I went out to the front door. Just as well I did, really, because after I'd been there a couple of minutes a man came down from upstairs—theatrical-looking bloke, Arnsworth obviously. On his way out to lunch possibly, or possibly not—he may have been looking to see what you were up to. Anyhow, I stood to attention and looked as official as possible, and he asked me who the devil I was. I said I was a police constable, here with the sergeant during the Inspector's

### *I Meet the Suspects*

absence—you see, I thought, as things have gone how they have done, that he had better know you aren't unprotected. But he didn't like the sound of it. 'You mean the place is lousy with policemen?' he said. 'And policewomen too, I gather?' I said, 'Oh no, sir. There's only Miss Benson here—she's the Inspector's fiancée.' He said, 'My God, so that's it! Deuced cunning she was, never telling who she was tied up with. And what does she think she's up to?' Well, I thought that was a good opportunity to put the wind up him, so I said, 'I don't know at all, sir. You could ask her, of course, but she's out at the moment—paying a call on the lady in the basement flat, I believe.' Then he gave me a very dirty look and fled along up the street. I just waited to see he didn't go down to make mischief for you."

"Oh," I said. "Well, I suppose that is all right, Mr. Tonks. Only I thought I was trying to keep myself secret."

"That wouldn't be the Inspector's method," he answered. "As far as I know, he has never gone about in disguise yet, and he doesn't approve of it, except for keeping tag on people. And I'll bet you anything that Arnsworth makes a fool of himself, now. He'll be scared stiff of what you're getting from his wife."

That reminded me that I had had quite enough time to bring Mary round with the brandy, so I went down the area steps again; but instead of running, this time, I lingered for long enough to make sure that Mr. Arnsworth wasn't following me. And I hoped that Mr. Tonks was still on guard.

xv

"It brought her round almost at once," I said, directly Stella Arnsworth opened the door. "And now she has perked up quite a lot. Oh, I am so grateful to you. You see, I was sort of responsible, being alone with her—although I've only been staying here a few days and I don't know her at all well. Not nearly as well as you do, of course. She taught you to read, didn't she?"

"I don't think she ever taught anybody anything," the girl answered. "She couldn't teach for toffee. I've no idea why they kept her at St. Ruth's—except that Miss Marks, who was the senior mistress, always stood up for her."

"I can imagine that," I said. "Miss Marks struck me as an extraordinarily kind woman. In fact, I've only met one person who didn't like her."

Then I tried to look self-conscious. "I'm terribly sorry," I said. "That was most tactless of me, because you must know whom I mean."

"My husband, I suppose," she said. "It would be a compliment, not to be liked by him. So you needn't worry on that score." She hesitated for a second. Then, "You say you've met him?"

"Oh yes, three times. I—I wasn't much attracted. It is all right to say that to you in the circumstances, isn't it? He didn't seem to me to be very sincere."

That made her laugh.

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"Sincere?" she cried. "He doesn't know the meaning of the word."

I suddenly found, then, that she was looking at me with a strange expression, as if she was trying to calculate my value. It was very odd. She said, "You are going to marry the police-inspector, aren't you? Mr. Gray told me that. What an interesting time you'll have! I suppose he talks over all his cases with you, tells you whom he suspects, and so on?"

I saw then that I should have to be careful: pumping was my game, not being pumped.

"He tells me a little," I admitted.

"Terribly interesting," she murmured. And then, "If Miss Lane will be all right for a few minutes, do come inside. It is cold here, and you've come down without a coat."

I couldn't object—I certainly did not want to object. So we went into the sitting-room. "You mentioned my husband," she said. "The trouble with him is that he is always acting a part. I suppose it has become second nature to him. So I've never known what he is really like. As a matter of fact, I doubt if he knows it that himself."

Then, before I could make any comment on that, she went on, "He always plays out the parts he has set for himself, to the last word. I mean he would do a thing if he thought it in the part, without troubling about whether it was reasonable and without thinking about the consequences to himself."

"Oh yes?" I said.

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"So you can hardly apply ordinary standards of conduct to him," she explained. "He beat me once with the back of a hairbrush: not because he wanted to, but because at the time he happened to be playing the domineering husband. It was in the part. And if he felt he had been victimised—over something or other—he would go out for vengeance, just because—because that would be in the part."

"Oh, I see," I said. I had imagined I should have to drag things about her husband—against her husband, in this connection—out of her by sheer force or trickery: I had never thought of her rushing at me and volunteering ideas to show him up as a murderer. I did not know whether it was a quite beastly hatred, or what. But in any case, so far, it did not seem to me quite convincing enough as evidence.

I said, "Do you mean he is insane?"

"Oh no. N-no," she answered. "But he does imagine people have wronged him, when there isn't any justification, and then he does all the things that a man who has been wronged would do—on the stage, anyhow."

She was looking at me, again, as if she wanted to be quite sure that her point had gone home.

So I thought I had better set her mind at rest.

"If he happened to be playing a part which would lead on the stage to a murder, for instance, he would actually commit the murder without scruples or conscience. Is that what you mean?"

She laughed again, not very convincingly. "That is

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such an extreme case, isn't it? It is difficult to conceive—— But that is the principle."

"But," I said, "if he isn't insane, he would have to have some grounds for thinking himself wronged in the first place. Supposing, for instance, that he has murdered Miss Marks. Do you know of anything——?"

"Oh, what a terrible idea!" she cried. "Of course I wasn't suggesting that, not for one moment."

"Then you don't know what could have made him think that Miss Marks had wronged him to that extent?"

"Oh dear," she said, "it is such a frightful idea. No, there wasn't anything really, that ever I heard of, but he did imagine things—and I suppose if all his acting did amount to a sort of insanity——"

It was disappointing. Possibly the idea was just plausible; but somehow I did not feel that Cheviot would be greatly impressed by it.

Perhaps that showed in my face. At any rate, Mrs. Arnsworth had no more to say to me about her husband. Instead, she suddenly said, "What did you think of Miss Lane? Did she take you in, with all her lovey-dovey gush?"

"Take me in?" I repeated. "I thought she piled things on a bit thickly, but that's her nature. I became quite fond of her."

"Yes, she's quite a good sort," said Stella—rather surprisingly, after her opening remark. "I've always felt very sorry for her. It must be terrible to live with someone who is so kind to you that you are never

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allowed to forget that you owe your existence to them."

As that seemed to be exactly the idea—or at any rate might easily lead to the idea—which I had come there to disprove, I braced myself to resist it.

"I don't believe Miss Lane feels that at all. She is terribly appreciative and grateful——"

Stella laughed. "Even meek little sheep know which side their bread is buttered," she announced. "Miss Lane had thrown up her job and commuted her pension, and she had to keep in with Miss Marks at all costs. Of course she was tied hand and foot to Miss Marks. And you can't believe that she enjoyed the position. As a matter of fact, I know she didn't. Underneath the 'darling Harriet' and all the rest of it, there has always been a lot of bitterness."

I was beginning to feel a little bit relieved. Obviously if Mary had been "tied hand and foot" to Harriet and had had "to keep in with her at all costs," she wouldn't have murdered her. That stood to reason, so it seemed that I might get something of what I wanted after all.

"You mean that now Miss Marks has gone, Miss Lane has nothing to live on?" I suggested.

"I suppose she could take a job again. She wouldn't want to, I dare say, but it would be better than the completely dependent life she has been living. And of course she will now escape all the rows."

"Rows?"

"Oh, didn't you know? Every now and then the worm turned, and Miss Lane spoke her mind. Only of

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course it never did any good because she was always repentant immediately afterwards and then the 'darling Harriets' came thicker than ever. Actually, there was only one subject which got her sufficiently worked up to be really nasty, and that was the trouble about her nephew, Brian. Miss Lane always maintained that he wasn't guilty, and Miss Marks said he must have been. They went at it—"

I said, "Guilty? I don't understand."

"Didn't you hear about that? Brian committed some crime and went to prison four or five years ago. As far as I know, he is still there. Anyhow, no one ever sees him. But Miss Lane more or less won in those disputes, and Miss Marks never dared to be really severe about him. Or rather, I never heard her. Of course, if she did, when they were alone, anything might have happened. Saying nasty things about Brian was the one thing Miss Lane would never forgive."

'Anything might have happened.' That, of course, was the point of all that speech. 'Anything'—even murder.

So I hadn't, after all, got anything to help Mary, but only something which would go badly against her.

Oh dear, I thought, I ought to have anticipated this; for now I can't help telling Cheviot what I have found out. It wouldn't be fair to keep quiet. But when I tell him this—

Of course, it did not follow that any of it was true. Stella Arnsworth was a really nasty bit of work. She had tried to plant the murder on her husband—well, at the

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least, she had tried in "directing suspicion" against him; and when that hadn't worked she had produced all these hints and more than hints about Mary. She really was a—

Because I felt like that, I said, "Well, those are your ideas about your husband and about Mary Lane. Now what about George Gray? He's as likely as anybody to have committed this murder, isn't he?"

It was interesting. She went as white as a sheet, and cried, "No. Oh, no, no."

### xvi

In the first second, I said to myself, "Oh, so George Gray did it, and that's why she wants the buck passed." Then I said to myself, "It doesn't follow he did it, but she thinks he did." And at last I said to myself, "That doesn't follow either, because she might have done it herself, and still not want George suspected; or neither of them did it, and she still doesn't want George suspected, knowing that there are grounds on which he could be."

So altogether I hadn't been very successful.

In fact, I was just where I was at the start of this interview, except that I had gained three things: the idea that Arnsworth had dramatised himself to the point of insanity, or nearly; the story of Mary having quarrelled with Harriet; and the fact that Stella Arnsworth, for one reason or another, would sink to any depth of beastliness to shield either George Gray or herself. It was something, but it wasn't much.

XVII

At that point it occurred to me that in another minute Stella would be accusing me of neglecting my "invalid"; so I said, "Oh, my goodness, what a time I've been here," and started for the door, murmuring renewed thanks for brandy.

I was bitterly disappointed, detection not being nearly as easy as I had imagined: indeed, the most I had got out of my effort was a new respect for Cheviot. After what Stella had told me, I was not going to chip him again about his "imagination."

I pushed open the front door and went into the main hall—and there I found Mr. Tonks and Norinan Arnsworth, standing and glaring at each other.

Tonks said at once, "I tried to get rid of him, Miss Benson—"

"Seemed to think I ought to be afraid of him," said Arnsworth. "I've only just got him to grasp that I'm not in the least. Nor of any man, come to that. But I'm not so sure about women—you never know how you stand with them. You've been seeing my wife, haven't you? What's the idea of that?"

"Oh, just curiosity," I answered. "Is there any particular reason why I shouldn't call on her if I want to?"

"Was there any reason why you should, that's the point," he retorted. "What have you been asking her?"

I wasn't going to answer that one. "Oh, she did most of the talking," I said.

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"All about me," he said. "You ought to have enough sense not to believe her. Like all women, she hasn't any principles, doesn't mind what she says. And she's the most credulous woman I've ever come across: she picks up a bit of a rumour here and another bit there, and she believes the lot for absolute facts. Look here, Miss Benson, you tell me what she said about me, and I'll prove to you in a minute that none of it is true."

I caught Mr. Tonks's eye at that moment and thus became bold.

"Including the thing you are afraid she has mentioned?"

That pulled him up.

"It's not the truth I'm afraid of," he said, "but any lies she may have told about me. You can report to your inspector all that is true about me, and welcome. But not the lies, without my having had a chance to deny them, even. Look here, don't you see what the position is? Somebody has done a murder in this block and so we are all of us suspects, everyone in the building, whether there's evidence or not. Well, everyone except you, I daresay. That means me and Stella and that damned man Gray, and little Miss Lane. We either take it—being suspected of murder, I mean—and don't care, or else we wriggle, feeling it would be nicer if somebody else was more suspected than we are. I can tell you that Stella will do a lot of wriggling. Knowing her pretty well, I can tell you exactly how she'll do it. No accusations, because she's in no position to make them, but she'll make sure that nothing is overlooked that could

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possibly count against anybody. Well, not 'everybody': she'll be mighty cagey about herself, and if she and Gray haven't got across one another yet she'll be very cagey about him. But the rest—that means only Miss Lane and me. Yes. She once caught Miss Lane in a bit of a tiff with Miss Marks and told me about it, exaggerating it into an unholy row. I bet she told you about that, and managed to give the impression that they had rows all the time. Wasn't that about the size of it?"

I was so pleased to see a let-out over Miss Lane that I said, "Yes. Well, I mean she did say something of the sort."

"Of course she did. All a mighty exaggeration. The same about me, I suppose. I gave her a playful slap once, so I bet she said I strapped her every Saturday night. Didn't she?"

I hedged. "That hardly came into it."

"Only to show what a brute I am, and therefore quite likely to be a murderer. What else was there? I don't see that even she can have produced any reason why I should have wanted to murder Miss Marks, so I suppose she said I was a raving lunatic who didn't need a motive."

I suppose my face gave the show away, then, for he went on, "Oh, she did, did she? How sweetly kind of her! Well, I don't know how much experience you have had of raving lunatics, but they don't behave the way I do. Anyway, if that is all you got out of Stella, I don't see that I need worry. No responsible police-inspector is

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going to make trouble for me merely on that score."

He turned away then, and went upstairs.

When he had gone, Mr. Tonks said to me, "I bet that man's a liar. He's got a motive all right, or he wouldn't be making all that fuss. You'll have to tell the Inspector about him, Miss Benson."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CHEVIOT BURMANN FINDS THE POISONER

#### I

CHEVIOT BURMANN returned late that night. Naturally, he was very much surprised when the door was opened to him by Constable Tonks. He just managed to enter the flat with becoming dignity, and then his feelings got the better of him.

"What the--what are you doing here, Constable?"

"Relief for Sergeant Kimber, sir."

"What's the matter with the sergeant? Where is he?"

"He's asleep, sir. He has the night shift, and I have the day, sir."

Cheviot said "Oh." Of course he ought to have realised, when he made the arrangements, that two men at least would be necessary for a twenty-four hour guard. That had been silly of him, and he couldn't grumble that Sergeant Kimber had corrected him. Neither could he legitimately complain, as he knew that Kimber had selected young Tonks, who always worked with him now. But all the same——

Then he told himself that such ideas were unworthy of him, because they implied distrust of Kathleen. Which was nonsense. He did not feel anything of the sort. He didn't care if there were a dozen young Tonks around her.

### *Drink Alone and Die*

Constable Effingham, now, could have done the job just as well, if Kimber had had the sense to select him: an unhandsome youngster with a face which was rather reminiscent of that of a mule. Or Wilson, who had a bit of a cast in his left eye, though not enough to plough him in the medical. Or Howard, who was forty-five and pretty stolid. Any of those could have done it, but of course Kimber, being a fool, had to choose Tonks. Oh damn, what did it matter? Of course it didn't matter in the least. Kathleen would be waiting for him.

#### II

She had, in fact, gone to bed, rather early, but she appeared in a dressing-gown and rushed into his arms. As he kissed her, Cheviot saw out of the corner of his eye that Constable Tonks was staring at a picture in the most discreet manner possible. Damn Constable Tonks!

"You've been quite all right, dear?" he said to Kathleen. "There hasn't been any trouble from—her?"

"Oh, Cheviot, of course not," she answered. "You don't still imagine—"

He started to lead her towards the room he had previously used as an office. At the door she suddenly said in a quiet tone "Goodbye."

"Goodbye?"

"To my reputation," she explained. "I don't mind in the slightest, and I daresay Mr. Tonks is modern enough not to be censorious. But Sergeant Kimber will be around in a minute, and I am perfectly certain he will think the very worst."

## *Cheviot Burmann Finds the Poisoner*

“Oh damn,” said Cheviot. Frowning heavily he led her to the dining-room instead, so that they sat on hard chairs and looked at one another across the breadth of the table. It was more than a minute before Cheviot pulled himself together and laughed.

### III

“That is one of the pleasanter examples,” he said, “of the fact that you and my work don’t mix, my dear.”

She was serious at once.

“Cheviot dear, I’ve learnt—realised, I mean—how absolutely true that is. Of course you can’t do your best work when I am around.”

He laughed, a trifle complacently.

“Oh, I hardly know about that. I am doing extremely good work on this case. It won’t be my record for speed, but it isn’t too bad. I rather expect to have Mary Lane in the cells some time tomorrow.”

“Cheviot! You’ve—found out something?”

“Enough, I should think to blow sky-high any defence she can put up. The ‘darling Harriet’ stuff is all nonsense, a complete sham. At the school, in the last years, the authorities got tired of Miss Lane’s hopeless incompetence, so Miss Marks—who was then senior mistress and running a boarding-house—took her on as a sort of secretary-matron. She was actually under the matron and not much above the maids, when she was doing that part of the job, and for the rest she ran errands for Miss Marks. Fearfully infra dig of course,

### *Drink Alone and Die*

and she must have hated and resented her position. Only poverty and the impossibility of getting another post made her do it, I suppose. Then Miss Marks got her legacy and retired, and there wasn't any question but that Miss Lane would go with her as 'companion'—an invitation was hardly necessary. Incidentally—though it hasn't so much bearing now—I was exactly right about the farewell presentation. Anyhow, it hasn't been a case of two friends living together—oh no, not at all. Miss Marks has had someone whom she called her friend, but who was actually almost a skivvy. The 'friend' idea—certainly at the school, and doubtless here as well—was merely Miss Lane's method of keeping her end up, which Miss Marks complacently tolerated. My goodness, how Miss Lane must have hated her!"

Kathleen said, "Oh, I don't believe Mary is such a hypocrite."

"Call it self-deception, if you like," said Cheviot. "Or say she is Jekyll and Hyde and doesn't know it. I don't care. The fact remains that all the time she was saying 'darling Harriet,' whether she believed she meant it or not, she had a deep, underlying resentment for what 'Harriet' had done to her. And deservedly so. I haven't any evidence, but I wouldn't be a bit surprised if now and then her feelings bubbled over and they had real rows."

"Oh dear," said Kathleen. "Yes, they did."

Cheviot was startled. "You know that? You saw them? But you never told me."

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"I only learnt it this afternoon. They quarrelled particularly about Mary's nephew, who must be a sort of ne'er-do-well: at any rate he is in prison."

Cheviot said, excitedly, "Oh, by Jove, that's wonderful. Now I shall get a cast-iron case against her."

"Stella Arnsworth told me a lot of other things too," said Kathleen. "I think her idea was to put the blame anywhere she could, provided it wasn't on George Gray or herself. The person she put most of it onto was her husband. She couldn't actually produce a motive for him, but she said he is practically insane in his passion for playing theatrical parts all through his life, so he wouldn't need an ordinary motive. And Cheviot, I also found out, from Mr. Arnsworth himself, that he only pretended, on the Tuesday, to have gone teetotal—that must have been, or at least it could have been, so that we didn't start on the drinks till after he had gone. Oh, and there was another thing: Mary told me that she and Harriet had practically broken off relations with Norman Arnsworth, although Stella was always welcome; so he must have felt —"

Cheviot was staring at her in amazement.

"You mean to say you have heard things about my case from all these people? Do—do you mean that they came to volunteer statements to Sergeant Kimber, in my absence, and he allowed you to be present?"

"Sergeant Kimber doesn't know anything about it," she answered. "I had a—a little chat with Mary. And then I—I asked Mr. Arnsworth to come down. And later," she went on with a rush, "I called on Stella.

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You see, I was so sure you were wrong about Mary, and I felt it was all my fault——”

He was staring at her in dumbfounded surprise and horror. When at last he found his voice, “You actually did that?” he cried. “You saw all the suspects and talked to them, one after another—deliberately?”

“But, Cheviot,” she said, “it wasn’t such a dreadful thing to do. I wanted to help you. I thought the people wouldn’t be frightened of me and would talk more readily than they did to you. And they did, actually. I got a lot of things you’d missed. Why, you didn’t even learn that Stella Arnsworth was at St. Ruth’s as a girl; did you? Mary told me that, and all about how Harriet found them the flat upstairs, and——”

“You really mean,” said Cheviot, “that although you knew that Mary Lane was my principal suspect in this case you went and talked to her about it? Good heavens! Did you tell her I suspected her?”

“She seemed to know that,” Kathleen answered, “so I said you had to suspect everybody as a matter of course.”

Cheviot groaned. “I never dreamt that I couldn’t trust you not to interfere,” he said, bitterly. “And even now I can’t believe——I’m sure you would never have thought of doing such a dreadful thing. Is this that confounded—did Constable Tonks put you up to this?”

“No, of course not,” she said quickly. “He hadn’t anything to do with it.”

“Seeing that he was here, he must have known what

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you were doing. Why didn't he stop you? Why didn't he report at once to Sergeant Kimber?"

With a sudden coldness which she did not feel, Kathleen said, "I am not under police orders. I don't have to be reported to a police-sergeant."

"Interference with the police in the course of their duties is on the crime-list," he retorted. "You may not have realised that—I can only hope you didn't—but Tonks knows it perfectly well. He knows it is a thing I wouldn't allow for a minute. Now tell me," he went on, in the tone which he normally used for his suspects, "all this was Constable Tonks's idea, wasn't it? He was criticising me, I suppose, having the sauce to disagree with my handling of the case, and then he put you up to——"

"No, Cheviot, no," she cried. "He hadn't anything to do with it. I did it entirely on my own, because I thought it was the right thing to do."

"I see," said Cheviot.

He got up without another word and left the room. In the passage, he said, "Oh, there you are, Sergeant Kimber. You weren't available when I arrived, but never mind: I hope you have had a comfortable sleep. You can go off duty now, and take that constable with you. I shall pass the night here and you can send Constable Howard to be on duty here for the night, and there must be a relief for him in the morning. I shan't require Constable Tonks here again. I shall want a word with you about your arrangements here when I have time to spare for it. That's all."

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He did not return to Kathleen. Instead, he began flinging cushions and blankets onto the sitting-room settee, mumbling under his breath while he did so.

### IV

Cheviot rose early the next morning, in a fever to get this damned case finished and put away at the earliest possible moment. He prepared his own breakfast, doing the work very quietly and in a sense guiltily. It was not till he was in the toast-and-marmalade stage that he began to wonder about that feeling of guilt. . . .

Then he realised that it was because he had not said "Good night" to Kathleen the evening before, and was thus embarrassed over saying "Good morning" to her now.

In fact, he was something more than embarrassed: he was really quite afraid of meeting her. Supposing she did not say "Good morning," any more than he had stopped to say "Good night"! Supposing she didn't kiss him—it was quite likely that she wouldn't. Supposing she just said, "Oh. Hullo," and went away again. Or didn't say anything at all!

And if it came to that, he wasn't hurrying because he wanted the case finished—though he did—so much as because he wanted to get started on it, to be shut in some room with Miss Lane where Kathleen wouldn't intrude—and where he would have an excuse for not doing anything about her if she did!

That was a nice state of things, to be sure. A nice thing for a chap who was engaged, and expecting to be

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married in a matter of weeks—to be positively shivering in his shoes at the prospect of his future wife coming in to breakfast!

Oh hell!

Of course, it wasn't really that he was afraid of Kathleen—why should he be, since it was she who was utterly in the wrong?—but only that there would have to be a showdown, and he wanted to start off on the right foot. Oh yes, that was all, of course. If she was hurt with him, for not saying "Good night," he would have to explain about that first of all; by the time that was over, he would be apologising, probably, and she would be graciously accepting the apology and allowing him to kiss her—and then how on earth could he immediately go on to say, with proper emphasis, that it was abominable, unthinkable and intolerable that she should interfere in his cases, and there must be no more of it ever?

So obviously he had got to choose his moment with care.

She must be made quite aware—and if she had an hour or two for it to sink in, that wouldn't matter—that it was he and not she who had the right to be offended. Then he must talk very plainly to her. He would do it with kindness, of course—not treating her as, please God, he would soon be treating young Constable Tonks—but nevertheless the position would be made exceedingly plain. Oh yes, indeed it would.

There was a ring at the doorbell and a moment later the constable on morning duty came to tell him that Mr. Gray was extremely anxious to see him.

He did not in the least want to be bothered with George Gray. On the other hand, now that his mind was disturbed, he was in no mood to start on a vital interview with Miss Lane: and seeing Gray would at least provide him with an adequate excuse for avoiding Kathleen. So he said, "All right. In the sitting-room," and bolted the last piece of toast.

The moment he came into the room, Gray said, "Look here, Inspector, this is by way of being a complaint. But I know you'll take it in the right spirit. The British citizen has his rights, of course, and you'll agree that there are some things which oughtn't to be done, even in the name of the police. Or *especially* in the name of the police, perhaps. Mind you, it's awkward having to make the complaint to you, of all people, because the complaint concerns Miss Benson. But still——"

Cheviot said, very coldly, "Would you mind cutting these preliminaries and explaining in two words what you are getting at?"

"Oh certainly, certainly. You see, yesterday afternoon, Miss Benson came down to my place and told Stella—Mrs. Arnsworth—some story about Miss Lane having had a heart attack and being in need of brandy. The brandy was supplied, and about twenty minutes later Miss Benson came again with the remains of it

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and a lot of gratitude—and also a lot of questions. I wasn't in, I heard of it later: and when I heard of it—well, in the first place, that story wasn't true, it was all a bit of trickery. I know that, because I met Miss Lane a couple of miles from here, out walking, at the time when Miss Benson said she was prostrate with a heart attack. Now, I suppose the police are allowed to do that kind of thing: I don't know, but I suppose they are. But I'm damned sure that it wouldn't be permitted for a minute, for it to be done by someone who isn't in the police at all. Miss Benson may be going to marry you, but that doesn't——"

Cheviot had never felt so acutely disturbed, so utterly horrified. He had visions of the story coming to his superintendent, to the Assistant Commissioner, even to the Home Secretary—of questions about it in the House—of the newspaper headlines—of his own inevitable disgrace and resignation . . . or dismissal. And—good heavens!—what else, even worse perhaps, had Kathleen done, in these wild escapades in the name of the police? It wasn't only Stella Arnsworth whom she had seen. Had she played tricks too on Miss Lane, on Norman Arnsworth? Any one of them could make trouble now—justifiable trouble, too—just as this man Gray could do.

Gray wasn't going to be easy to pacify——

What was more, it wasn't practicable even to attempt to pacify him, for that couldn't be done without letting Kathleen down, humiliating her by apologising for her.

He said, with extreme severity, "Mr. Gray, in the

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conduct of my cases I employ whatever means appear to me to be suitable. Sometimes it is necessary to use the services of people who are not officially connected with the police. When that is necessary, in the interests of justice, I do not hesitate to do so. And my agents are authorised to employ whatever ruses are advisable. If that is the sum total of your complaint, there is no more to be said."

To make the bluff more effective, he turned away as if to leave the room: though he had very little hope that it would succeed.

He was, in fact, astonished when George Gray appeared to crumble under it.

"Oh well, if that's the rule. I wouldn't know. It merely seemed to me—— Anyway, leaving complaints aside, what I really wanted was to explain to you about Stella. She's a good kid, but she's emotional—can't take things calmly. It ought to be obvious to anyone that she and I aren't concerned in this murder case of yours. At least, I am, in a sense: I'm tremendously cut up about poor Harriet's death. But that's the only point at which it touches us. So it is much better for us to keep out of it and leave you to get on with the job. See?"

"No," said Cheviot. "I don't."

"Oh," said Gray. "I hoped you might. Well, the point is that Stella has been using her imagination—quite unnecessarily—and she has gone off the rails altogether. To put it in one word, she is afraid you might have suspicions of *me*. Quite absurd, of course, as I've told her. You couldn't possibly, could you? But

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you know what women are like: they don't reason, can't see anything straight, they merely live on their emotions. Stella is mighty fond of me and she'd do anything for me. The trouble is she does too much, when she needn't do anything. See the idea now?"

"No," said Cheviot. He did, of course: he had done from the start—or at any rate from the moment when he had ceased to be so acutely troubled about possible interviews with the Assistant Commissioner. But although he did not think that Mr. Gray could have anything of value to tell him—anything which touched on Mary Lane's guilt—he knew from long experience that it was a mistake to help people out when they wanted to make statements.

"Thought you'd be quicker in the up-take," said Gray. "You're making it very difficult for me. What I mean is that Stella said a lot of things to Miss Benson that she needn't have said. They were all true, of course, but she'd have done better to keep her mouth shut."

"I don't see why," said Cheviot. "It is everyone's duty to help the police, and if Mrs. Arnsworth had any information—"

"So long as you take it that way," said Gray. "I was rather afraid you might have thought she had a particular reason for turning away suspicion when there wasn't any levelled. And of course there's no earthly—"

"Oh, *that*," said Cheviot. "You mean that I might have assumed that Mrs. Arnsworth's defence of you

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was because she suspected you herself? Well, I did, of course. I gather she wondered how much Miss Marks had meant to you in the past and eventually began to wonder—as I did also, you remember—whether you had married her. You denied that, but your denials didn't ring very true and she wasn't satisfied. To try you out, she put up the marriage plan, and it was obvious that that put you in a spot. Being a woman, she had to know one way or another, even if it didn't matter very much—I mean even if she was prepared to continue living with you without a marriage. The idea that you were keeping a vital secret from her began to rankle, so she forced the pace by sending that letter to her husband and naming you. After that, she supposed, there would be a divorce, with you as co-respondent, and you would have to marry her—if that didn't mean bigamy. So at any rate you would have to show your hand. If you had come clean, I expect you could have been happy enough together without any marriage service; but she had to know. Women are like that."

"I know," said Gray. "I reckon that's just about the size of it."

"Yes," said Cheviot. "But what Mrs. Arnsworth didn't foresee was Miss Marks's death at precisely that point. It must have looked to her as if you had found another way out. I suppose it says a good deal for her feelings for you that she is defending you instead of walking out on you."

"When this clears up," said Gray, "I'll marry her."

"Oh, I'm all for marriage," said Cheviot.

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Nevertheless he wondered, momentarily, whether he meant that. It was a dreadful thought. Not for one moment, till now, had he doubted that marriage to Kathleen would be the best of all possible things. But what was it going to consist of? Living always in dread lest she interfered, lest she did things which would drive him out of his job? Telling her off, quarrelling with her, trying to maintain his own position in spite of her?

He was not listening to what Gray was saying. How on earth could he concentrate on his case when he had this other worry, about Kathleen? Supposing she had played some inadmissible trick on Norman Arnsworth, and there were protests and complaints which he couldn't kill by bluff as he seemed to have killed those of George Gray! Supposing things did go to the authorities, and he had to leave the Force and take some twopenny-halfpenny job in an office!

Pulling himself out of those thoughts, he said, very brusquely, "We needn't waste more time, Mr. Gray."

"Er, no," said Gray. "I suppose not. But I'd just like to know—— If you could give me some assurance——"

Of course the man wanted to know that he wasn't officially suspected. Naturally enough. And he wasn't. His mind could be set at rest in a moment. But why should it be? What did George Gray and his anxieties matter?

In the past twenty years, Cheviot would not have given that assurance, because it wasn't his way to put people at their ease, even when it did not hurt his case to do so. Only recently had he mellowed a bit, become

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kinder. But that kindness was due to the influence of Kathleen. Now, he wasn't sure of Kathleen, wasn't sure of himself, wasn't sure of anything. Why should he bother about this man, George Gray, or about anyone?

He said, harshly, "I never write anyone off the list till a case is solved. When you are out of the wood, I'll tell you. Now, I've a lot to do, if you don't mind."

### VI

He was not so sure that he had a lot to do. At least, there was a lot to do, a terrible lot to do, but he did not know what order to do it in. The thing that mattered, of course, was his interview with Mary Lane. But could he safely do that without first dealing with Kathleen and at least making sure that she wasn't even now plotting some further mischief? Supposing, even while he was closeted with Miss Lane, Kathleen got up to something, playing another trick on Stella Arnsworth, for instance?

Like a caged lion, he tramped to and fro across the sitting-room floor. Then the decision was taken from him by the sight of Kathleen coming out of her bedroom. He stopped abruptly. In her orange housecoat, just as he had first seen her, she looked lovely. It was unthinkable that he could tell her off, quarrel with her. He only wanted to take her in his arms, kissing her hair, her lips.

She stopped too, seeing him. She said, "Oh. Hullo."

He said, "Hullo."

She said, "I was just going to get breakfast."

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He said, "Thank you. I've had mine."

She came on, then, and went into the kitchen, passing very close to him, without a motion to touch him.

He said, "You won't be seeing anybody in the next hour, will you?"

She said, "I can't help seeing anybody who's there. I won't *try* to see anybody, Cheviot, if that's what you mean."

He said, "Thank you."

It was terribly difficult not to add "my dear." It was also terribly difficult not to ask her what on earth had made her put him into a confounded mess by butting into his case.

### VII

So he was free, at least, to deal with Miss Lane. The difficulty there, however, was that there was no sign of Miss Lane. Presumably she was in her bedroom and not up yet. That need not matter, of course; yet he felt a certain vague and unusual embarrassment. There again the trouble was the presence of Kathleen. Ordinarily, a woman suspect, whether dressed or nude, was just a suspect: whereas now, because Kathleen was around, she would be a woman. Very odd that, really. It would be infinitely preferable to have Miss Lane up and dressed, and to take her to his office for questioning, where the walls were bare and comfortless and everything would be formal. It would even be a comfort to have Sergeant Kimber with him, looking like an unemotional old sheep.

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Oh damn, damn, damn, what a mess women could make of a man's life.

And how he longed to go into the kitchen now. . . .

But the problem was to get hold of Miss Lane, to bring her out of her bedroom. And unfortunately there was only one effective way to do that.

He didn't do it, because obviously he could not go into the kitchen now. But when, a few minutes later, Kathleen came out, carrying a tray with Mary's breakfast on it, he said, "I shall be obliged if you will kindly ask Miss Lane to get dressed and come and speak to me."

Kathleen looked at him without answering. She went on, and then, at the bedroom door, she said, "Very well. You must give her time for her breakfast." She disappeared into the bedroom, and he at once became agonised as to what she was saying to Miss Lane, besides his message.

Would she think herself entitled to give warnings, to offer advice?

### VIII

Mary Lane appeared, fully dressed, half an hour later. For all that time, Kathleen had been in her own room, with the door shut. For all that time, Cheviot had paced the sitting-room.

He summoned Constable Howard, and said, "I have already given you the official warning, Miss Lane. That still applies."

He waited a moment, partly to let that sink in and

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partly to make sure she got the full effect of what he had to say next.

"I returned last night from Bedlington," he said, and waited again. But she showed no signs of surprise, and only the alarm which had been brought to her by the 'warning.'

"Yes," she said. "Naturally you wanted to learn something about darling Harriet's earlier life. Though of course I could have told you better than anyone."

"Then you are not surprised that I went?"

"I was just a little startled when Miss Benson told me that that was where you had gone," she answered, "but I soon came to realise——"

He told himself, savagely, that he must not let his indignation get the better of him. Above all, he had to concentrate on this interview. At the same time—— Of course it would be like this at every point: he would not be able to spring a single surprise on Mary Lane.

Still, there were other methods, and, by jove, he would use them.

He therefore put on his most suave demeanour, and said, "I expect you feel quite jealous of me for having had the chance to go back there. Such a charming town, and a most impressive school. Fortunately for me, most of the retired mistresses have settled in or near the town, and some others who knew Miss Marks are still on the staff, so—— I heard the most glowing accounts of her scholarship, and her way of handling the girls."

"Oh yes," said Mary, "she was simply wonderful."

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Cheviot noticed with satisfaction that she was calming down now, losing the air of caution which had come to her face over the "warning".

He said, "You were very happy at St. Ruth's?"

"Oh yes. At least, I wasn't really, because I never ought to have been a schoolmistress, I wasn't strong-Charactered enough. I used to be quite *afraid* at the beginning of every class-time, because little girls can be so—so very cruel to anyone who can't stand up to them. But I was happy at the same time. Because of darling Harriet, I mean. She was so kind."

"Yes, I heard all about that," said Cheviot. "Do you feel she did you a great service when she brought you into her house?"

"I was able to stop teaching altogether. I had hated it so much, you see, and when Harriet made that wonderful offer—"

"Yes," said Cheviot. "The alternative to taking it, I gather, would have been that you would have been dismissed?"

"Oh, I expect so," said Mary. "I could never think why they put up with me for so long."

"So, although you call it a 'wonderful offer,' it was a case of any port in a storm. Beggars can't be choosers, can they?"

"Ye-es," said Mary. "I mean, no of course not. But that doesn't make it any less kind of Harriet—"

"So that," said Cheviot, "you couldn't refuse to do anything she put on you. Weren't you practically her personal servant?"

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"Oh, that is a dreadful thing to say," she cried. "Of course, I did sometimes do things the maids would have done otherwise, just to help, but I didn't *have* to, and certainly Harriet never wanted me to. It was merely that I was so grateful and I wanted so much to help."

"Still," Cheviot persisted, "it must have gone against the grain to be doing purely menial tasks. You wouldn't have been human if you hadn't rebelled at them."

"I never did that," said Mary. "You see, whatever I did, it was always because darling Harriet and I were such friends."

"Outwardly, that was so, I know," said Cheviot. "But I find it impossible to believe that underneath all that you didn't feel a bitter resentment. The idea that you and Miss Marks were equals and friends was all a sham—in point of fact you were kept by her in place of a general servant. And you have been in exactly the same position since you have been here with her."

"Oh dear," said Mary. "I—I don't think you ought to say that. I know I did a lot of things—— But it has been such a pleasure to me to—to be able to show my gratitude."

"I see," said Cheviot. "Then you are really telling me that you have never felt any resentment against Miss Marks for the way she treated you?"

"Oh no, none at all. Oh dear no."

"I see," said Cheviot. "I see. Then the numerous rows you have had with her——?"

"Rows?"

"I have abundant evidence that both at the school

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and here you and Miss Marks have had violent quarrels. It is no use your denying that. I can produce witnesses against you."

She was very white. There was no question that she was thoroughly alarmed by now. For a long minute she was silent, as if uncertain what to say. Then, in a voice that trembled a little, as if she was still uncertain as to the best line to take, she said, "Well, even good friends quarrel sometimes."

"Not really good friends," retorted Cheviot; and immediately he was abashed by the thought of how he was quarrelling, even now, with Kathleen. For a moment, that made him lose the thread of his argument: it was only with a great effort that he got back to it.

"Constant quarrelling doesn't fit," he said, "with the kind of devoted friendship you claim to have had for Miss Marks. On the other hand, it does fit, of course, with the sense of resentment which I am certain you must have had against her. Miss Lane, I put it to you that your habit of referring to 'darling Harriet' has no meaning at all, except as a sop to please her and as a pretence, for the sake of your personal pride. I suggest that you were never on terms of friendship and equality with her as you try to make out. I further put it to you that, on the contrary, you have for a long time had feelings of hatred towards Miss Marks, and that from time to time those feelings became uncontrollable in you, so that you burst out into violent quarrels with her."

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"Oh. Oh," cried Mary. "How can you say such a wicked thing?"

"I have put that to you," said Cheviot. "What is your reply?"

"It is utterly untrue," said Mary. "We've been—we've been such perfect friends, always."

### IX

"Very well," said Cheviot. "That will go down in the record as your answer. Now I must turn to another aspect of the matter. I have told you how I believe this murder was perpetrated. I do not believe for a minute that the illness which affected Miss Marks and Miss Benson on Tuesday night was merely a coincidence—I am sure that was a part of the murderer's plan. But if so—that is to say, if something to cause the illness had been added to the gin on Tuesday—it must have been a different bottle that was taken on Wednesday morning for analysis. You are sure you haven't anything to tell me about that?"

Miss Lane's reply was almost inaudible; but she shook her head, and Cheviot could tell from her lips that the words were "No. No."

"I understand that only a few minutes elapsed," said Cheviot, "between it being decided that the bottles should be taken for analysis and Miss Benson's departure with them. Before that decision was made, there was no urgency about removing the doctored bottle: therefore presumably the removal was made during those few minutes. Nobody was in the flat then except

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Miss Marks, Miss Benson and yourself. Miss Marks was hardly capable of getting out of her bed. Miss Benson was in her room, preparing to go out. But you went to the sitting-room—where the girl was—in order to ring up for a taxi. Tell me, did you have great difficulty in getting through to the rank?"

"No. I don't—I don't really remember."

"I could doubtless check the point with the taxi-driver. I think you had better remember."

Mary said, "Oh dear." Then she said, "Why do you have to torture me? I've told you I didn't do anything."

"I take it you got through on the telephone quite quickly," said Cheviot. "Then you must have finished that some minutes before you took the bottles to Miss Benson. How did you fill in the time?"

Mary was dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief. "You go on and on, badgering me," she complained. "I don't know what I did. I—I suppose I just waited for Miss Benson."

Cheviot got to his feet, standing over her. He knew he was more impressive that way.

"Is that all you did? Was there any point in merely 'waiting'? You could have taken the bottles to Miss Benson's room, and then you would have been free to go back to Miss Marks. But you didn't do that. So tell me what you did do."

He waited. She was silent.

"You didn't stay in the sitting-room, did you?" he urged.

She looked up. She was watching him, hesitating. He

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was quite certain then that she would tell him everything when he had pressed her a little more.

He said again, "You did not stay in the sitting-room?"

Suddenly, with a little gulp, she said, "I—I did go out into the passage."

Trying to keep the triumph out of his voice, Cheviot said, "As far as the store-cupboard? Didn't you go to the cupboard to fetch a fresh bottle of gin, then into the kitchen to pour away a little of its contents so that it should be only as full as the other bottle, and then back to the sitting-room? Didn't you do that? Didn't you?"

Mary said, "Oh dear, you do confuse me. And you frighten me, too. I am—I am trying to remember exactly what happened."

It seemed to be a toss-up, then, whether he should press her harder, or wait and see whether it had worked. He decided to wait for a minute at least. He sat down again, trying to be calm. . . .

And suddenly Mary said, "Yes. Yes, I did do that."

#### x

Cheviot leaned back in his chair for a moment, with a sudden relaxing of tension. Then he drew himself upright again and said, "Then you confess ——"

Mary gave a little sigh, and said, "I suppose I had better tell you all about it."

"You must remember the warning I have given you. Now tell me."

There was silence again. Mary was sitting with her

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hands tightly clenched, as if struggling for self-control.

"It was on Tuesday," she said at last, "that I did it. I put a tablespoonful of an emetic into the bottle of gin. Only afterwards I was terrified because darling Harriet was so horribly ill, much worse than I had intended her to be. I almost thought she was going to die, and I had to send for the doctor. And that was terrifying, too, because I thought he might find out what I had done."

Cheviot said, being a little mystified by this, "You didn't want her to die *then*?"

"Oh no, of course not," cried Mary, "I'd thought she would only be a little ill. I suppose I must have put in too much, only a tablespoonful didn't seem a great deal in nearly two-thirds of a bottle of gin. You wouldn't have thought that too much, would you?"

It seemed unbelievable to Cheviot that anyone could ask that question, in so naive a tone, in the middle of a confession to murder. Mary Lane, he decided, must surely be extremely simple, if not actually off her head.

"Well, go on," he said harshly.

"Darling Harriet was better in the morning," she said, "and oh, I was so truly thankful. But then she called Miss Benson in, and began talking about having been poisoned; she thought poor Mr. Arnsworth had done it, and she wanted to send for the police—that was really terrible for poor me, because I supposed the police would be certain to find out what I had done. Only luckily Miss Benson said it would be a good plan to have an analysis made first. Just for a moment I thought that would be just as bad, but then I saw that it

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needn't be, if only I could have a minute or two alone.

"So I said the analysis would be a very good plan and at last Harriet agreed and told me to fetch the bottles—which was exactly what I wanted, of course. So while Miss Benson was putting on her things, I rang up for the taxi—and oh, I was *very* quick about that—and then I got a fresh bottle of gin from the store-cupboard and poured a little from it down the sink—just exactly as you said, though I can't think how you know—and then I put the bottle in place of the other one, in the sitting-room, and threw away the one containing the emetic in the dustbin."

Cheviot said, "Yes. Now, before you go on with the rest, I should like you to tell me why you did all this. Was it as I said—so that Miss Benson, in particular, should acquire a distaste for gin?"

"Oh, I wasn't bothering about Miss Benson," she answered. "It was most unfortunate that she should have to be ill, but I couldn't help that, could I? And it didn't really do her any harm."

"Oh," said Cheviot. "Then I don't think I understand. If that wasn't the reason for this first episode, what reason was there?"

"Oh dear," said Mary, "I thought you'd see, because you seem to have found out practically everything. It was all because of darling Harriet having those quarrels with me. They only happened occasionally, but they did happen and I couldn't stop them in any other way. I had tried so hard, but when she was like that I just couldn't do it."

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“Like what?”

“Oh dear. I don’t want to say it, and perhaps I oughtn’t to. Particularly now that she is dead. But the fact is—— Well, I’m afraid she used to get quite tipsy over our gin in the evenings. Not every night, though I think it always affected her a little. When it was only a little, it didn’t matter, but when she was—— Well, she used to call it ‘being sozzled.’ Such an ugly expression, I always thought. But when she was like that, I don’t think she even knew what she was saying.”

“Well?”

“It was quite terrible. I didn’t think I could stand much more of it. And, you see, it was perfectly clear that it wouldn’t happen at all if she didn’t take the drink. When she wasn’t having that, she was *so* sweet, so very fond of me, and she wouldn’t have said a word to hurt me for the world. So at last I—I decided I had to do something about it.”

“Well?” said Cheviot again.

“So—so I did it,” said Mary.

“But go on,” said Cheviot. “You have told me about Tuesday night and Wednesday morning. Was it on Thursday that you put in the poison?”

“Oh,” cried Mary in shocked tones, “I didn’t do *that*.”

“You said a few minutes ago that you did. You can’t go back on that now. You said you had to stop her from being quarrelsome under the influence of drink, and—these are your exact words—you said ‘So I did it.’”

“Yes,” said Mary, “that’s right. It was exactly

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as I've told you. I put the emetic in the gin——”

“Are you now telling me,” said Cheviot, “that that was all you did, and that you were not responsible for her death?”

“Oh, I couldn't be responsible for that, could I? I mean, just because I made her ill on Tuesday? That would be altogether too terrible!”

Cheviot said, “Oh, forget about Tuesday. I am now talking about the poison which she drank in the gin on Friday night. Do you solemnly tell me that you had nothing at all to do with that?”

“Oh, of course I didn't,” cried Mary. “What a perfectly terrible suggestion!”

“And that all you did was to play this little game with the emetic?”

“Oh, it wasn't a game, it was all most terribly serious. If you knew how bad she could be when she was tipsy, you would understand how very serious it was. I had to make her most unpleasantly ill—but without hurting her, of course—so that she would never want to face the drink again.”

“I see,” said Cheviot. “I see.”

#### **xi**

He let her go back to her bedroom, then. He sent Constable Howard to the dining-room, to type out his notes. And he remained alone in the sitting-room, deep in thought.

Curiously, he was not thinking, just then, about Mary Lane. Nor even about Kathleen Benson, although she

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still kept flitting, as she had done for the past two hours, across his mind, as a source of worry rather than an object of thought.

What he was doing was trying to locate and pin down a half-thought which had come to him—or very nearly come to him—somewhere in the course of his interview with Miss Lane. He knew perfectly well that if he had been in good form and with an undistracted mind, he would have nailed that half-thought immediately it appeared; and he would either have kept it securely or discarded it, according to its value. But in the condition he was in now, with all this trouble about Kathleen to plague him, he had done no more than realise that there was a half-thought in the offing, without recognising it; and then he had let it slip.

Only too well he knew the importance of such half-thoughts. They meant, he supposed, that his subconscious had noticed something which his conscious mind had missed. Quite often the whole key to a problem made its first appearance that way.

Now, what the devil was it? Something—some apparently insignificant remark made by Miss Lane, probably—or a presumably irrelevant disclosure of fact: the sort of thing you wouldn't consciously notice and would miss altogether if your subconscious failed to pick it up and say, "Hi! That bit doesn't fit." But what the dickens it was—— Damn, it had completely gone.

And there, to make it impossible for him to search the inner recesses of his mind without distraction, was Kathleen in the kitchen, drying-up the breakfast things—

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and drying them, by the sounds, with a quite unnecessary amount of vigour, which must mean—

How could he possibly concentrate, with all this on his mind? There'd be Arnsworth coming down in a minute with a complaint; and then all the effort to bluff him off, with the certainty, if the bluff failed, of an interview with the Assistant Commissioner at the very least. And even if that were avoided, there remained the fact that there still had to be an interview with Kathleen—a thorough show-down, with some very plain speaking. She'd be hurt, of course, and angry: and then she would give him back his ring, and it would all be over, and he'd be back in his loneliness again. Oh, damn, damn, damn.

### XII

He heard a sound and looked up, in sudden dismay because Kathleen was standing before him. Now the show-down was coming, long before he was ready for it, before he had made any proper plans.

She was looking down at him and smiling: but it was not her usual smile, all jollity and teasing, it was a rather wistful smile, very unsure of itself and yet determined to be a smile for all that.

She said, "No prisoner, Cheviot?"

The great thing at the moment was to play for time, to keep talking. He said, "No. No. I didn't feel sure enough. In fact, although I haven't thought it all out, I rather fancy, now, that she didn't do the murder. In which case you were right and I was wrong. She has

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admitted putting an emetic into the gin on Tuesday: she says she wanted to put Miss Marks off the drink, because she was always quarrelsome when she was sozzled. An absurd thing to do, of course, but she is not an intelligent woman: in fact, she is extraordinarily silly. But I find it difficult to believe that even such a silly person would take the risk of admitting that incident if it had really been her first step in a murder. Besides, if allowance is made for her character, her story rang fairly true."

Kathleen said, quietly, "Clever of you to see that, Cheviot; and big of you to admit it. What happens now? Or oughtn't I to ask? Don't tell me if you'd rather not."

There was a humility in that which pleased him. Not, of course, that he wanted Kathleen to be humble to him, but still it showed she knew she was in the wrong, which would make things easier.

Now, there was the question of whether he was to meet her half way. They might even avoid the showdown altogether, if he could take what she had just said as a sort of apology and a promise for the future. But then he would have to accept it, and tell her things: he would have to discuss the case with her, taking a chance on her passing things on. He'd have to trust her, in fact. Oh, he wanted to, he wanted to tell her everything, to share all his thoughts with her. But could he, in fairness to his case?

With a sudden plunge, he said, "Well, I've got to start all over again. It's a different problem now. The

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incident of Tuesday being explained as irrelevant, the case now starts after Sergeant Kimber brought back the gin bottle from the analyst on Wednesday morning."

His thoughts ran more easily, and he got up and began to pace the floor.

"The difficulty is," he said, "that although I am accepting Miss Lane's statement, I cannot altogether take the incident of Tuesday as 'irrelevant,' because—because if it hadn't been for that, you, my dear, would presumably have drunk gin with Miss Marks on Friday and—and would have died as she did. And as I must assume that the murderer did not intend your death, it seems clear that the poisoner must have known of the Tuesday incident and its effect in making you swear off drink.

"At the moment, I am ruling out Gray as the murderer, because his story of his relations with Miss Marks is pretty consistent and is backed up by her account to you of her relations with him. I am inclined to rule out Arnsworth from complete lack of sufficient motive. Mrs. Arnsworth appears to be a nasty bit of work and completely callous, but she too lacks a motive. Besides, none of those three had the knowledge about the Tuesday incident which I am regarding as essential.

"But in that case, I am brought back to Miss Lane, as the only remaining possibility! And if I go on against her, I have to eat my words over thinking her innocent—and I have to admit the possibility that she has told

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me a clever pack of lies and has had me for a sucker. But if I don't do that, there is no one."

Kathleen said, "Cheviot, it could have been one of the people you are ruling out. There is at least one way—"

For one dreadful moment he thought she was going to confess to something. There was, of course, one way, though he had never considered it till this moment, by which George Gray or Norman or Stella Arnsworth could have learnt about the Tuesday incident and its effects!

With a dry mouth, he said, "Well?"

"You know I saw Mr. Arnsworth," she began.

He said—he wasn't sure why, except that he wanted to put off the pain—"I haven't asked for details about that."

"Oh, it was easy," she said, smiling. "I sent him a note and made him think he could come and make love to me."

Cheviot was of course aghast. Trickery again. And that Kathleen should stoop to that particular form of trickery, making use of—of her attractiveness—! But at the moment, that was not the trouble. Or not all the trouble. He remembered Arnsworth's disgusting phrase, "luscious young female." You couldn't help reading into what Kathleen had just said, that she had known that Arnsworth would be amorous with her if given half a chance. But how could she have known that, if she had only met him twice, each time in the presence of Miss Marks, and when he had been dis-

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traught over the loss of his wife? So she must have seen him at other times as well—times which she had never mentioned. Nothing very wrong, of course—nothing at all wrong—if she had: except her not mentioning that she knew one of the suspects a good deal better than he thought. And supposing in those talks with Arnsworth—perfectly innocent talks, of course, he wasn't going to think otherwise—she had told him about what happened on Tuesday night and the subsequent vows against drink!

Oh well, he had to know the truth, anyway.

He said, "We won't go into that, if you don't mind."

She said, "It will be no good shutting up— Oh, very well. But the point is that he came down, thinking it was just to be 'fun in the shrubbery,' and then he discovered that everything I said had a point to it—I'm afraid I made a dreadful mess of things—and he was terribly annoyed. And also, as far as I could see, pretty badly scared. Mr. Tonks was—"

She stopped very suddenly, as if she had not meant to say that. But Cheviot had heard it, and there was the old trouble coming up again. There were too many issues in this business, and you couldn't deal with them all at once. But that one certainly had to be dealt with.

"Oh yes?" he said, without trying to keep sarcasm out of his voice. "And what part did Constable Tonks play in this pretty business?"

"Oh dear," she answered, "you are going to get this all wrong, frightfully wrong. I shouldn't have mentioned Mr. Tonks. As a matter of fact, he is somebody

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you ought to think awfully well of. He is terribly keen on his job, and most enthusiastic, and—and he has a great respect for you. And he hasn't done the least thing that he shouldn't have done in what you call 'this business.' But we'll go into that later, if you'd rather. All I was going to say is that he also thought Mr. Arnsworth was so much scared that he must have guilt on his conscience. And what I was thinking"—she went on with a rush—"is that Mr. Arnsworth might have—it might have been all a scheme for him to poison his wife."

"His wife?" Cheviot was so much startled that for a second he forgot all the troubles. "But she wasn't in the flat."

"She was always a welcome visitor. I've only just thought of this idea, so I've nothing worked out, but isn't it possible that she was accustomed to visit Miss Marks and Miss Lane on a particular day—and supposing that day was Friday—and he knew that— You see, he hated his wife and he didn't much like either Harriet or Mary, so he wouldn't have minded if they had all three been poisoned. That only leaves me and anyway he might have got the idea that I wasn't staying so long."

"He'd have to be mad," said Cheviot.

"Oh, I think he is," Kathleen agreed. "His wife seemed pretty sure of it."

"I see," said Cheviot. "Well, I don't think much—" The troubles had already flowed back. There was a question that had to be asked. "You've told me

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that before Miss Marks's death you met Gray twice and Arnsworth twice, and Mrs. Arnsworth not at all. You have now told me of talks alone, since the crime, in my absence, with the two Arnsworths and with Miss Lane. I know you must have been meeting Miss Lane at various times, but are those the only times you've met the other people? Absolutely the only times?"

"Oh yes, of course," she said. "Except that I met Mr. Arnsworth in the hall yesterday."

He was relieved. Kathleen wouldn't lie to him, now.

Oh damn, he had been imagining things against her. This infernal habit of being suspicious of everybody—it even got into your private life, so that you built up theories against the people you cared for most. Oh damn, damn, damn, he was making a mess of his life.

### XIII

It was as if Kathleen saw that slight swing of the pendulum in her favour.

"Cheviot, dear," she said, "this has been a frightful mess and I am very, very sorry. I know you are awfully cross with me, and I'm not putting up any defence. But there is just one thing I must say to you, because it wouldn't be fair not to. In the first place, you haven't any cause to be jealous of anybody. Whatever silly things I do, I shan't do that. So, as that is so, do you think—do you think you could stop taking it out of Mr. Tonks? Please. It is so unfair, when everything is absolutely my fault. And he is so keen—he has so much ambition to get on in the police, that it would be awful

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if all his chances were wrecked because—because you had completely misunderstood something."

She stopped then, and waited with some anxiety for his reply.

He knew she had stopped speaking. More vaguely, he was aware that she had been pleading with him over something or other. But he had not heard a word she said, because just at the moment when she started on what appeared to have been quite a speech, that elusive half-thought had appeared again on the edge of his mind. Naturally, he had had to leave everything to chase it—in and out and round the corners of memory. The confounded thing got away every time, though once or twice he had seemed within an inch of catching up with it: he felt sure now that it was nothing to do with Miss Marks, in any direct sense, but was about something which Miss Lane had done—no, had failed to do. That was it, something that didn't fit as it should do because Miss Lane hadn't done something you would have expected her to do. Oh, dash it, thoughts shouldn't slip away like this. They wouldn't, of course, if only he was allowed to concentrate. . . .

And Kathleen had stopped speaking, whatever she had been saying, and apparently a reply was expected from him. So he said, "Oh, perhaps," which seemed as safe as anything when you didn't know what you were answering.

He knew immediately that she wasn't satisfied; and was, in fact, disappointed if not hurt. He was sorry, because he did not want to hurt her, at any rate by

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inadvertence. Sometime, they would have to have that showdown, and no doubt he would hurt her then, but at least that would be a deliberate hurting in a necessary cause. When it came to that, he would—

Certainly, he had that habit of suspicion, which he must conquer, because it would be most disruptive in married life, just as it had already led him into absurd fancies and jealousies. Of course he need not bother about Constable Tonks or Norman Arnsworth, or any other man. In fact, when it was whittled down, he had nothing to complain of except that Kathleen had not realised the seriousness of his work, the fact that it needed all his concentration—goodness knew he wasn't giving it that now, with all this worried wool-gathering—and the essential point that above all things she must not interfere in his cases. That was all. But still it was quite a lot. Really, the way she had behaved right through this case—playing chess with Tonks, then that absurd "lesson" from Tonks on finger-printing, and now the frightful interference with all his suspects—warning Miss Lane that he had gone to Bedlington, and tricking Mrs. Arnsworth, and—

His mind clicked very abruptly on to the half thought which had hitherto eluded him. This time he pounced on it and held it firmly, while his ideas raced into all the implications that led away from it.

He was in a daze of thought and imagination. In a matter of seconds he mapped out all the enquiries which he now had to make, in order to tie this crime on to its perpetrator.

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In the middle of everything, he became aware that Kathleen was speaking again: that she wasn't pleading any more but was speaking with something that sounded like bitterness and sorrow. As he leapt to his feet, he noticed that her right hand was held out towards him—

He cried out in exultation, "Oh, I've got it, I've got it. I've got the whole thing, now." Then he ran to the door, and out of the flat, not even stopping for a word of goodbye to her.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### I FIND THE POISONER

#### I

I DID not see Cheviot after that for four days.

They were the most miserable days of my life, because I did not in the least know what was happening, or whether anything was happening, or what it was all about.

All I knew was that I had humbled myself with apologies and they had been rejected. I had explained to Cheviot that he need never be jealous—and he had remained jealous. I had begged him not to seek vengeance, in his unnecessary jealousy, on poor Mr. Tonks; and instead of meeting me half-way, or coming all the way, he had done no more than to say “Oh, perhaps.”

And then, because we couldn’t go on like that, and if he wasn’t going to trust me it was no use our thinking about getting married—and also, quite a bit, because my temper leapt up over being treated that way—I had pulled off my ring and given it back to him: or at any rate, since flinging it at his feet would have been too absurdly dramatic, I had held it out to him. And he hadn’t even taken it—I was not sure that he saw it, and I couldn’t be sure whether he would have taken it or not if he had seen it.

Just at that moment, when it mattered so much to me

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that he should be Cheviot Burmann, he hadn't been Cheviot at all but only Inspector Burmann, C.I.D., and I didn't count.

After all, it is a little hard on a girl if she isn't even noticed by her fiancé when she is breaking off her engagement!

So for the first two days I was wild with indignation and I very nearly hated Cheviot.

#### II

I think it was the discovery that I was *very nearly* hating Cheviot, instead of hating him completely, that made me begin to think differently about things.

After that, I didn't bother so much about being indignant, but I was very, very miserable.

It was all made much worse by the fact that I did not know what was what. If I had been sure that Cheviot hadn't seen the ring when I held it out to him, I could have slipped it on again and when we met again—if we ever did—I could have pretended that it had been there all the time. But then he *might* have noticed, and it would be too dreadfully humiliating if he laughed and said, "Oh, thought better of it, have you?" And then again, if I didn't wear it and wasn't wearing it when we met—again, if we ever did—it would be embarrassing, to say the least of it, if he was surprised and said, "Oh, dearest, have you lost your engagement ring?" and I had to explain that I didn't know whether I was still engaged to him or not.

So really I didn't know what to do about it all.

III

Things became just a little easier on the third day, because I ran into Sergeant Kimber. He stopped and was disposed to be chatty.

"You've not been seeing much of the Inspector lately, Miss, I don't suppose. And we haven't either. One minute he's here, and it *is* a minute, and the next he's gone, and then its for hours or maybe days. And when he's in the office, he's like a whirlwind, and if I speak to him he doesn't recognise me, as likely as not. And if he does recognise me he doesn't want me, can't spare a minute for me; or else he does want me, that being all he's come for, and I'm rushed off, here and there and everywhere, like another whirlwind, on my own.

"He's always like this, when he's got his big idea. Oh, it may last days or it *may* last weeks. Only hope is that it doesn't fizzle out and leave him dished: because when *that* happens, it's more than my life's worth to be within sight of him—he'd burn the flesh off my bones for two-pence. But the signs are that it's all going well, this time: and that means that he'll come back one day, terribly pleased with himself, and be like a dog with three tails for perhaps as long as a week. Shouldn't be surprised if he had a minute for you, then, Miss."

It was terribly comforting to know that I had a fellow-sufferer.

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### IV

On the fourth morning I had a telephone call from the C.I.D. office. The voice wasn't Cheviot's; it wasn't Sergeant Kimber's; it wasn't even Mr. Tonks's. It was something quite unknown, and it said, "Inspector's compliments, Miss, and he'll be much obliged if you'll be at the office at fourteen hours today, sharp."

That, of course, brought back the indignation part of the trouble. No Cheviot, no love—only compliments and "much obliged." It really wasn't the way a girl should be treated.

Still, I had to go.

I decided to have lunch out, on the way. But actually, I spent so much time over my appearance, before starting, that there wasn't time for lunch at all. At least there would have been, only I thought there wasn't because I guessed that this was not a *tête-a-tête*, but something official, with other people present, and I didn't want to be the last, with a "dramatic entry." Consequently, I was easily the first to arrive.

When I entered the building, I at once saw Mr. Tonks, working beside the desk-sergeant. He looked a bit glum, I thought, but he did not appear to be under "disciplinary restraint," which was something. Then I was taken upstairs to Cheviot's room.

I was keeping my glove over my left hand. I was terribly flustered to know whether Cheviot would kiss me or anything.

He was over by the window, and he was talking to

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Sergeant Kimber; so the question of kisses did not immediately arise. Actually, he did not see me come in—at least, I had to keep telling myself he hadn't seen me, as otherwise I'd have ruined everything with tears. He paid absolutely no attention to me at all.

I sat down and waited. Cheviot went on talking to Sergeant Kimber. I went on waiting. I told myself I didn't care, and cared tremendously.

Then the door opened and Mary Lane was shown in. She looked frail and frightened: indeed, that was the first moment when I wondered whether Cheviot had been right all along and she was guilty. I couldn't think of anything else that could make her look quite like that.

A few minutes later Stella Arnsworth came in with George Gray. She looked scared too, but in her case it might have been awe induced by police surroundings—or, of course, not. It might have occurred to her that her husband was going to be there—or, again, not. Or perhaps there were a lot of real fears inside her.

George, on the other hand, was being the man of the world. Obviously, it didn't matter to him whether he was inside a police station or in a bus. He boomed, "Afternoon, Inspector. Keeping pretty fit, eh?" and sat down and looked with interest at the room. Only there wasn't anything in it to be interested in, so his interest must have been part of an act.

Then there was a little interval, and at last Norman Arnsworth came in. I felt that he had been waiting in the wings, so to speak, in order to make his entry as the

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“star.” At first, he looked tremendously conscious of the solemnity of the occasion; then he became aware of the presence of his wife, and registered a nice mixture of surprise, reproach and chagrin. He stood and stared in silence, as if his life with her had risen up before him. Then he recognised George and exhibited profound hatred: he took a seat as far from George as possible and sat in moody silence.

A file of constables then came in and stationed themselves round the room, making everything rather terrifying. I recognised two of them, but Mr. Tonks wasn’t there, so I gathered that he was still out of favour, after all.

Then, at last, Cheviot looked up. He was terribly solemn and unhappy-looking. His eyes met mine, and although there was “recognition” in them, there wasn’t even a flicker of a smile. I was suddenly filled with a longing to run away instead of staying there in misery. Only there was a big, elderly constable, with long moustaches, standing with his back to the door.

### v

Cheviot was speaking. He said: “I have asked you all to come here because you can help more over the termination of this case if I now see you all together. Four of you have at one time or another come under suspicion of having poisoned Harriet Marks. You, Miss Lane, must be well aware of that, and I think you are also aware that, although you gave me certain explanations, I did not find them entirely satisfactory. Mr. Gray

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also gave certain explanation—and then rather spoilt the effect by wanting assurances on the strength of them. Mrs. Arnsworth has, perhaps not realised that she was herself under suspicion; but nevertheless she has been on the list from the moment when I first met her. And Mr. Arnsworth——”

Arnsworth promptly looked up and said, “Ah. So at last we come ~~out~~ into the open. There have been dark, unpleasant hints and insinuations. Though I am the most innocent soul alive, and only the victim of unhappy circumstances, the cruel fates have gathered to torment me.”

Cheviot said, “Quite so. You, also, have been suspected. I have also asked Miss Benson to come here today. She is not a suspect for this crime, but she is very closely concerned in the happenings of it. Indeed, as I think I shall be able to show you, she was—in a sense—the cause of it. She was also—in a sense—the cause of the poisoner’s identity being discovered.”

I must say that gave me a terrible shock.

### VI

Cheviot went on: “Miss Marks appears to have been a very pleasant, well-intentioned woman, and not at all the kind of person who would give anyone cause for murdering her. But she had—and it is a habit not uncommon in school-teachers, I believe—a trick of humour which was no doubt very amusing as long as you were in the audience and not the object of it. If it

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was directed at you, and you were at all sensitive, it must sometimes have seemed cruel. I know that her fellow mistresses, when ~~she~~ and Miss Lane were teaching, often took it that way. The fact was that Miss Marks always wanted to enjoy her little jokes, and if somebody got hurt in the process, that was just too bad: the jokes could not be given up on that account.

“Of course, occasional visitors did not mind a great deal—that could get away. Miss Benson, while staying in the flat, thought some of the jokes in rather poor taste. Mr. Arnsworth, who was popular at first but afterwards disliked, probably thought they went altogether too far. Mrs. Arnsworth was tolerant but a trifle aloof, I expect. Mr. Gray—well, what about you, Mr. Gray? Did you mind?”

“Good Lord, no,” said George. “I’ve a sense of humour, thank God.”

“It must have been very useful,” said Cheviot. “Unfortunately, the person who suffered most has no sense of humour. I mean Miss Lane, of course. She must have endured agonies, with no chance of getting away and no authority—even if she had had the character—to say ‘You shut up!’

“Now, Miss Lane has told me something about that, and it appears, from her account, that it was not Miss Marks’s humour that mainly troubled her, so much as the fact that Miss Marks took too much to drink and was quarrelsome in her cups. But I think there was even more to it than that. In fact, I don’t think Miss Lane

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has yet given me the full account of the quarrels she had from time to time with Miss Marks. Can I now persuade you to add to what you told me, Miss Lane?"

Poor Mary looked terribly troubled at that. I did not know whether Cheviot was leading up to some new theory against her, or whether he was only trying to get information out of her for use against one of the others. He wasn't really in his stride yet.

I had half-forgotten my own troubles, in a terrible tenseness as I watched and wondered where he was going to spring. And then it suddenly occurred to me—I don't quite know why—that the poisoner must be Stella Arnsworth. There could have been something right back in her schooldays which would provide a motive. It was I who had discovered and told Cheviot that she had been at St. Ruth's—could that be what he had meant when he said that I had had something to do with finding the murderer?

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by Mary finding her voice at last. "Oh, n-no," she said. "There's nothing else. Indeed, there isn't."

"I see," said Cheviot. "Then I'll have to get at it in another way."

He suddenly looked straight at me, recognising my existence at last—and thus bringing back all my troubles. He gave me what I took to be an encouraging smile, too: though whether the encouragement was because he wanted me to help him or to go on loving him, I hadn't the faintest idea.

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"I want you to help me by recalling the day you first met Miss Marks and Miss Lane," he said. "You told me something about it in your letter. There were two moments when the concord between wasn't quite perfect. What were they?"

"There wasn't anything very serious," I said. "Only that Mary said Harriet had never understood her nephew and Harriet complained tha. Mary would 'jump down her throat' if she criticised him; and that Mary didn't like Harriet talking about a so-called 'crime' she had once committed."

"Yes," said Cheviot. "Miss Marks was a little under the influence of gin at that time, and it had two effects on her: it made her a bit difficult and quarrelsome, and it made her talk in a way which Miss Lane regarded as indiscreet. Indiscreet, or dangerous, perhaps."

He turned away from me and faced the others.

"I imagine you can all confirm that Miss Marks was 'difficult' when the subject of Miss Lane's nephew came up. But I want to know whether any of you have had experience of her tendency to be indiscreet—and of Miss Lane resenting that or being afraid of it. In particular, I want to know whether any of you have known Miss Marks to tell—or attempt to tell—this story about a 'crime'."

George said at once, "It's been a secret from me; I never heard a word about it."

Stella said, "I knew something about it. It was mentioned several times, but never with any details. It always seemed to be a bit of a joke between Miss Marks

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and Miss Lane. There wasn't ever any sign that Miss Lane was horrified about it."

"I see," said Cheviot. "I may say that is the answer I expected. If I put what Miss Benson has said and what Mrs. Arnsworth has said together, I am bound to come to the conclusion that this story of an alleged crime committed by Miss Marks has been a harmless jest for some years, and has only become something that mustn't be mentioned, very recently. Or else that it is something that can be mentioned to Mrs. Arnsworth, but must not on any account be mentioned to Miss Benson. That is an extraordinary conclusion. It becomes still more extraordinary when you know what the story is—or is said to be. Miss Lane has told it to me, and according to her the 'crime' was absurdly trivial: merely that Miss Marks once gave a too flattering reference about someone—a thing we have all done at one time or another to help a friend, I expect. And yet the story mustn't be told—to Miss Benson, in particular.

"Now, the only thing I can think of to account for that is that Miss Benson is engaged to me, and therefore would be expected to pass on to me any story she might hear in connection with a 'crime.' In fact, I think I am bound to assume that to be the truth of the matter: that this act of Miss Marks's is one which mustn't reach *my* ears. Or rather one which Miss Lane doesn't want me to hear of. From which it follows, of course, that the account of it which Miss Lane was willing to give me was not the true one."

VII

It was a very good thing, from my point of view, that he stopped just there. I wouldn't have heard any more, for a few moments, because I "had been torn out of attention to what he was saying by the realisation that he had said, quite clearly, "is engaged" and not "was engaged." My heart was turning over and over. I suddenly thought how silly it was to be wearing one glove. So I dragged it off.

"Now," Cheviot went on, "the idea that Miss Lane was anxious above all that I should not hear the truth about the 'crime' as Miss Marks would herself have told it to Miss Benson is supported by Miss Lane's own actions. According to her own account, she even went to the extreme length of putting an emetic into the gin—in order to put off Miss Marks from drinking. She says that was to stop her becoming tipsy and quarrelsome, for all time. But she can hardly have imagined the effect would last for ever—though it might well have lasted for the few remaining days that Miss Benson was expected to stay in the flat.

"So far, then, the story is becoming fairly clear and reasonable. There is this nasty story—whatever it is—which Miss Lane doesn't want me to hear of, although apparently Miss Marks did not mind who heard it. There is Miss Lane showing incredible anxiety about keeping it secret and going to unheard-of lengths to ensure that it remained so.

"That was the position on the Tuesday evening. By

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the Friday the bottle of gin had again been doctored, but not this time with a simple emetic: cyanide of potassium had then been added to it, and Miss Marks died.

"That raises the question of whether her death was the continuation of what had been going on before, or something quite fresh. And the answer to that seems to depend a good deal on whether certain things which Miss Lane has told me are true or false.

"I have already shown that I believe Miss Lane deliberately misled me when she said she was only trying to stop Miss Marks from being 'quarrelsome.' She told me a lot of other things beside that, though: were they true or false?"

"Oh, I haven't told you anything that wasn't true," cried Mary.

Cheviot said, "Then will you please be strictly accurate in your replies to the questions I am now going to ask you? On the Wednesday morning, the day after the first incident, you, Miss Marks and Miss Benson were together in Miss Marks's bedroom when it was decided that the bottles of gin and lemon should be taken away by Miss Benson for analysis. Miss Benson then went to get her coat, and you went to telephone for a taxi. You have told me that after telephoning you did certain things in order to ensure that the bottle which went to the analyst was not the one into which you had put the emetic. Now, I want your account of that in much greater detail."

Mary said, "Oh dear. Well, I went to the side table

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and took up the bottle of gin and carried it into my bedroom and—and hid it for the time being under my mattress. Then I went to the store-cupboard and took out another bottle of gin. I poured some of the gin from that bottle into the sink——”

Cheviot said, “Yes. You are absolutely sure you have not left out any minor detail of what you did up to that point?”

“No. No, I don’t think so. I—I am sure I haven’t.”

“I see,” said Cheviot. “I see.”

I saw him whisper to Sergeant Kimber, who went out of the room. Then Cheviot said, “You weren’t wearing your outdoor clothes, were you?”

“Oh dear no. As a matter of fact, I was in my—I had been up all night with darling Harriet and I was wearing my dressing-gown.”

“And your handkerchief—where was that?”

Mary stared at him in complete surprise—so did I, for that matter. She said, “My handkerchief? In my dressing-gown pocket, naturally.”

Cheviot said, “Can you be sure of that, though? You didn’t take it out to see?”

“Oh no,” answered Mary, looking more mystified than ever. “Of course it might have fallen out of my pocket——”

### VIII

Sergeant Kimber came back at that moment, accompanied by Mr. Tonks.

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"Ah, Constable Tonks," said Cheviot. "There is a little point I want you to check for me. You won't have any difficulty, I expect, in remembering what you said to me when you first arrived at Miss Marks's flat on the day of the crime. You recollect that you were rather upset over your first murder, so I expect things are stamped on your memory. I was asking Miss Lane to allow her prints to be taken, and you intervened to say you had already taken them. Do you remember that?"

Mr. Tonks said, "Oh yes, sir. Of course, sir."

"Good," said Cheviot. "And having previously told me that there were the prints of two women and one man on the bottles, you said, 'The prints on the bottles aren't hers.' You remember that too?"

"Yes, sir."

"In point of fact, it was subsequently found that the three sets were those of Miss Marks, Miss Benson and Sergeant Kimber. So your statement that Miss Lane's prints were not on the bottles was confirmed. But now, Miss Lane has told me that only about twenty-four hours earlier she handled that gin bottle quite considerably — taking it from a cupboard and pouring some of its contents down the sink, and then putting it on the table. I gave her the opportunity of saying that she was wearing gloves, or that she covered the bottle with a handkerchief, but apparently she took neither of those precautions. That being so, can you account for her prints not being found on the bottle?"

Mr. Tonks stared in amazement at Cheviot, and then

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glanced quickly at Miss Lane. Then he said, "No, sir. I can't account for that at all."

Cheviot said, "Very well. And do you still say, Miss Lane, that you handled the bottle with your bare hands?"

There was no answer. Mary was in tears.

### IX

For a moment there was silence. Mr. Tonks took that as a sign that he was dismissed, and turned to the door: but Cheviot said, "Oh, you had better wait a little longer, Constable. I may need you again." Then he said, "The other day I was away in the country in connection with this case. During my absence, Miss Benson—doubtless from the very best of motives—undertook certain enquiries in connection with the case."

He turned to me, looking—for once—horribly embarrassed.

"You haven't told me the details yet," he said, "but I gather that your desire to take a part in the case was used by everyone concerned in it to put the blame on to somebody else?"

It was terribly difficult to concentrate. But I thought for a moment and said, "Mary didn't. And I didn't see Mr. Gray. And I don't think Mr. Arnsworth actually did that. So really it was only—"

I did not like naming her. Cheviot had said that he knew through me who was the poisoner, and if that meant it was Stella, who was the only one who had made a real effort to shift the blame—

Cheviot said, " 'Only'? Do you mean 'Only Mrs. Arnsworth'? You are quite sure there was nobody else at all?"

"Yes," I faltered. "Yes, I'm afraid I am."

"I see," said Cheviot. He hesitated a moment, looking still more embarrassed. Then he said, "I know you've told me that it was all your own idea, going to see those people, and that you did it because you felt I was wrong in one of my suspicions, and that you blamed yourself for that. What put the idea into your head that you deserved blame for that?"

It was terrible, I mean, that wasn't the place or the moment for our dirty linen to be washed, whenever we did it. For a moment, I was going to be indignant. And then, ever so suddenly, I got an inkling of what he meant.

## x

I sat, I believe, with my mouth open, staring at him, while a whole flock of ideas crowded into my mind. I didn't say anything: I couldn't, I was too much startled. We just looked at each other, Cheviot and I, and I think there must have been something telepathic going on. Then he said, "Yes. It would have been like that, you know." And although I suppose that was fairly obscure, I understood him perfectly.

He suddenly said, not so much to me as to the others, "I come to my last point. I have always refused to believe that the poisoner, having a motive for murdering Miss Marks, just didn't care if Miss Lane and Miss

Benson died as well. Or even if one of them died. Throughout the whole case that has been a great difficulty. It suggested that the poisoner knew that, after the episode of Tuesday, Miss Benson—and Miss Lane also, for that matter—had decided to leave the gin alone: but Miss Marks made the same decision—though she did not keep to it—so how did the poisoner know of two of those decisions without knowing the third?

“Moreover, Miss Benson has assured me that, as far as her own decision was concerned, she mentioned it to no one except Miss Marks and Miss Lane—and there was a general agreement on the subject between those three.

“Thus, if I was to overcome that difficulty, I had to find someone who knew of Miss Benson’s decision and knew of Miss Lane’s decision—but did not know that the same decision had been made by Miss Marks.

“Now, I think Miss Benson made a mistake—one which put me wrong through a good deal of this case—when she said she only told Miss Marks and Miss Lane. I am sure she made a mistake there.”

He turned to me, but I could only shake my head at him. I hadn’t made any mistake about that: I knew I hadn’t.

“I won’t ask you to think again,” he said, “but I think Sergeant Kimber will be able to refresh your memory. Sergeant Kimber?”

“Yes, sir. I can, sir. Miss Benson told *me*, when she

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brought the bottles for analysis, and we had a little joke about it—well, I said she'd have to make an exception in favour of champagne, sir."

I saw it all then, of course, as that memory came back to me. And—well, it was a very horrid, very painful thing to see. I had thought of Mr. Arnsworth as the poisoner, of George Gray, of Stella Arnsworth, even of Mary Lane. But I had never for one moment thought of Mr. Tonks.

And even now I did not see how that was possible.

#### xi

Cheviot said, "Yes. And Miss Lane, whom did you tell about your own decision to refrain from drinking? Or I'll put that more succinctly. Did you tell your nephew, Brian Lane?"

Poor Mary was stricken speechless with a mixture of pain and misery and, above all, dread. As I looked at her, I saw other people too. I saw Mr. Tonks, white and scared. I saw Sergeant Kimber, close behind him, impassive, grim and official. And I saw Cheviot, suddenly grown enormously big as he dominated the whole scene—I saw something new in him, which seemed to justify all the qualities which I had liked least in him. He was grim, but he wasn't hard; he was stern, and yet he showed pity; he looked as if he couldn't be shaken from doing his job, but nevertheless hated having to do it.

He said, "Let us make an end of this. Brian Lane, is it my duty to warn you that anything you say may be

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taken down in writing and used in evidence. Do you admit that you are Brian Lane?"

Mr. Tonks said, "I—I don't know what you mean." Then, apparently in a last effort to maintain his identity as 'Constable Tonks,' he added, "Sir."

Cheviot went on, "Four years ago you applied as William Tonks to join the Metropolitan Police. You were sent the usual forms and were requested to supply two letters of personal recommendation. Those letters were written for you by Miss Harriet Marks and Miss Mary Lane, both of whom said they had known you for a number of years, which was true, and that you were of irreproachable character—which they knew was not true. They both referred to you as 'William Tonks,' although they knew that that was not your real name. Neither letter mentioned what both the writers knew—that under your real name of Brian Lane you had served a prison sentence of six months for assault. Subsequently, according to the usual police practice, the writers of both letters were personally interviewed; and both Miss Marks and Miss Lane repeated the lies they had already written on your behalf.

"I am not concerned with why they told the lies; but I imagine your aunt, Miss Lane, wanted you to make a fresh start after what she probably regarded as a minor slip made in youthful exuberance, and she thought that in the police that exuberance would be kept under control. I suppose she considered—and also persuaded Miss Marks—that such a good end justified

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bad means to obtain it. I imagine, too, that you yourself wanted to go straight but preferred a job which provided chances of occasional excitement. In any case, the false letters of recommendation were sent, and it was on the strength of them that you were accepted into the Metropolitan Police.

“I must assume that you were glad of the fresh start and anxious to make good. But you had only got that chance by false pretences, and you always knew that, if ever the truth came out, you would immediately be discharged in disgrace from the Force. You must have known that if that happened, your prospects would be very thin indeed. I have no doubt that it weighed very heavily on you—that for four years the thought of losing everything through discovery has been a constant nightmare to you. I have no doubt that it brought you to a state of mind in which any action, however drastic and desperate, seemed preferable to that disaster.

“There were only two people who could give you away. You were quite safe as far as Miss Lane was concerned—she was your aunt and devoted to you. But Miss Marks was unreliable when under the influence of drink, and she never took what she had done very seriously, always referring to it as ‘her crime.’ And when she threatened, as Miss Lane told you, to tell the whole story in front of Miss Benson, you were naturally terrified. If Miss Benson heard the story, she would tell it to me: and then your fate would be sealed.

"So at all costs Miss Marks had to be silenced.

"Your difficulty was how to do it, since you hadn't the entry into her flat. But it happened, quite by chance, that you saw before you, in this office, a bottle of gin belonging to her. As Sergeant Kimber's note-taker, you heard the sergeant speak of returning it after the analysis, and you heard Miss Benson say she would not drink any of its contents. Then, in the course of your duties here, that bottle—after its contents had been analysed—came into your hands. It was easy for you, then, to take some cyanide from the photographic room and add it to the gin. Thus it was Sergeant Kimber who, in all innocence, actually took the poison to Miss Marks's flat.

"After that, you had only one precaution to take. You asked your aunt to meet you that afternoon and by some means or other you got her assurance that she had no intention of drinking the gin. There was no difficulty about that. She was almost as scared as you were over the prospect of Miss Marks telling her story to Miss Benson—certainly because of devotion to you, possibly also from a fear of being prosecuted for what she, at any rate, knew to have been a very real crime. She knew of only one way to make sure that that didn't happen: she had to stop Miss Marks from getting tipsy. So naturally she was not going to encourage Miss Marks to drink—she was not going to drink herself as long as Miss Benson remained in the flat.

"You, however, knew Miss Marks pretty well, and

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you knew that even if she made a resolution to abstain she would quite soon go back to the drink. Miss Benson probably wouldn't, Miss Lane certainly wouldn't; but the poisoned bottle would remain on the side-table, and one day, probably quite soon, Miss Marks would drink from it.

"I imagine you were never quite sure about Miss Benson. You had heard her speak of signing the pledge, but she might not have been very serious about it. But I don't think you bothered very much about that: you weren't greatly interested in whether Miss Benson lived or died, and you were prepared to take a chance on her keeping her resolution. On the other hand, you were satisfied that your aunt would escape, and that, with Miss Marks quickly dying and you not being suspected of her murder, was all that mattered to you.

"There is one redeeming feature in your conduct. Though you had no mercy for Miss Marks, you wanted, after the crime had been discovered, to protect your aunt from suspicion. Therefore you rubbed her finger-prints off the gin bottle and told me they had not been there. And for the same reason, when I was becoming very suspicious of Miss Lane, you again tried to save her—by inducing Miss Benson to start enquiries which might have confused the issue. Unfortunately for you, those two actions—the only ones in the whole business in which you showed feeling for anyone but yourself—led me to suspect you.

"Brian Lane, alias William Tonks, I have here a

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warrant for your arrest, and I now therefore charge you——”

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When Brian Lane—though I could still only think of him as “Mr. Tonks”—had been taken below, George Gray, Stella Arnsworth and Norman Arnsworth filed out of Cheviot’s room. They looked, I thought, rather like mourners leaving a funeral service, and even Mr. Arnsworth was shocked, momentarily, into a sense of reality. Only poor Mary remained, utterly stunned and unable to move. I went to her, of course, though consolation in her tragedy was hopeless.

I was in rather a quandary, really, because I wanted so much to have at least a few moments alone with Cheviot; and yet I too was weighed down with a sense of tragedy. In any case, it would have been too heartless to leave Mary, and eventually I had to take her home, leaving all the things I wanted to say to Cheviot still unsaid.

I put Mary to bed, I sent for her doctor, I tried to dry her tears. It was a relief when at last the doctor’s opiate sent her off to sleep.

Then I sat alone by the sitting-room fire, and felt miserable.

I was wretched about “Mr. Tonks”—chiefly, I think, because you can’t play chess with a man, and then switch over at a moment’s notice to thinking of him as a despicable murderer. At least, I can’t.

But particularly—and more and more as the clock

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ticked on—I was wretched about Cheviot and myself.

Up to then, I hadn't been taking the right line about him and his job. I saw now that it was too big, and too much concerned with human lives, for me to butt into it in my amateurish and feminine way, at the risk of spoiling things.

But on the other hand, neither was Cheviot taking the right line about me, with his jealousy and his disregard of me whenever he was a bit preoccupied.

So sooner or later we should have to have a show-down. I wondered whether that would have to end in my giving him back his ring again. And I wondered whether he would see, this time, if I did.

### XIN

I was in the kitchen, miserably looking for tea, when the bell rang. I opened the door, praying that it would be Cheviot. It was. He said "Hullo," and I said "Hullo," which seemed to be how we spoke to one another nowadays. I led him into the sitting-room, knowing perfectly well that he too had decided on a show-down. But he seemed to be waiting for me to speak first. And I was waiting for him to speak first. So we neither of us spoke, and we only looked at one another.

Then suddenly he held out his arms.

And I didn't really want anything except that. Neither did he, apparently.